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THE VEIL

A ROMANCE OF TUNISIA

BY

E. S. STEVENS

NINTH EDITION

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À MES AMIS
BACHIR, DOUJA, ZOHARA, ET BEYA ABID
CE LIVRE
EST AFFECTUEUSEMENT DÉDIÉ

PREFACE

TO anticipate any criticism, I should like to point out that this book does not in any way claim to be a political picture of the French Colonies, or a narration of actual events; neither are there any portraits of personalities who took part in the peaceable political drama which was enacted in 1881. In a word, the story has no claim to being anything more than a romance.

I should like, at the same time, to take this opportunity of thanking the various French and Arab friends in North Africa who helped me in gathering information, and Mr. Hughes Massie for his kindly interest in this book, which would not have been completed but for his encouragement.

E. S. STEVENS.

THE VEIL



PART I

THE VEILED HOUSE

CHAPTER I

THE carriage lurched in the soft sand and came to a standstill. A blinding whiteness struck upwards from the ground, which was barren except for greyish tufts of *zita*, the yellow-blossoming desert herb; and an occasional tamarisk, hoary with powdered dust and seemingly sapless and ancient. The naked range of the Zibans stretched to the right, their bare flanks and sharp outlines etherealised in the clear blue air of the noonday. To the far left an oasis of date-palms rose against the golden distance in flat monotone; beyond that again another, intangible as the clouds. Stillness and heat, heat and stillness. The carriage had been the only moving object in the great plain. It had four occupants; two Frenchmen, one an officer in the uniform of the Chasseurs d'Afrique; an Arab driver whose face was swathed to the eyes in soft muslin, and a second Arab somewhat coquettishly attired in the costume of a Tunisian grandee in full white breeches, a salmon-pink

sash, and a heavily braided jacket in silver and blue. As the carriage lumbered to a halt, he turned round upon the box to address his patrons.

"Messieurs, it is better to descend—the sand is heavy here, we must lighten the carriage."

"Confound my spine," growled the civilian. "We should have ridden in one quarter of the time."

He was an elderly man, browned with weather, lined about the eyes through the constant wrinkling induced by the sun. His companion, the officer, was about thirty years of age, alert, capable-looking, well-built; with restless, adventurous blue eyes thickly lashed with black—Celtic eyes which betokened at once instability and charm. He assisted the elder man to descend.

"The road grows better in a short distance," said the Arab as he swung down from the box.

"It was folly to attempt a camel track in this," the civilian grumbled again. "By God, Colombel, if I'd known we were in for this I'd have risked riding. The damage to one's spine wouldn't be half as serious as the injury done to one's temper."

The two men walked side by side without speaking, the coachman and the diaganman encouraging the thin horses to drag the wheels through the fine, deep, white sand.

"Taieb!" shouted De Colombel.

"Sidi?"

"We ought to have taken the Ourlal road."

"This road is the best, sidi. This is the road that Si Ismael takes in a landau once a week."

"*Mashallah!*" ejaculated the driver piously. "All roads are easy to the marabout, the friend of Allah."

Count Cassilis smiled. "Your friend is accredited with miraculous powers down here, it seems. Even

my workmen up at Macmahon told me about him."

De Colombel gave a laugh, and kicked restlessly at a mound that broke into pearly ripples like a liquid as it slid away.

"There was little miraculous about him when I knew him. He lost considerably to me at cards."

"Algiers is civilisation—you don't know the South as I know it. You'll probably find the Sheikh of Silga a vastly different person from the Si Ismael with whom you played baccarat at the Résidence. How long did you know him there?"

"About a year. I never liked him much, though he was accepted by every one, partly on account of his money, partly on account of his brains. They say his mother was the daughter of an erratic Irish peer, and that when she came out here to get over the death of her lover, she met the old Sheikh in Constantine, and ran off with him. A curious mixture—a sheikh and a mad Irishwoman!"

"I heard that. But you met him in Paris, you say?"

"Yes. He was the fashion for one season—Heaven only knows why. The Comtesse d'Hannay, his cousin on the mother's side, took him up—she made no secret of the fact that she was in love with him, and he had a reputation for being witty in seven languages. When I met him in Algiers, he was received everywhere. He didn't mix much with the Arabs however."

"I can't understand that. Algiers must remember that his father was Ben Aloui."

"I don't think Algiers remembered anything except that he was rich and amusing. He dressed and lived like the rest of us. He sold me a racer once. Jacques

de Rossignol, my sister's husband, was very friendly with him—they shared hobbies. Jacques is a numismatist, you know, and Si Ismael possessed one of the finest collections of Phœnician and Greek coins in the world. He had an Arab house on Mustapha Supérieur."

"And an Arab household?"

De Colombel shrugged his shoulders.

"At that time Pierre Loti was fashionable, my dear Count, and we were most of us experimenting in wives. Si Ismael would have lost nothing in the eyes of his European friends by filling his women's quarters. But when I went to the house with my sister and her husband, we were entertained by what represented his household—a girl of about twelve. There was Circassian blood in her, I should say, from her skin and colouring. She promised to be a beauty. She could chatter in sketchy French, wore French dresses, and acted the hostess very amusingly. My sister fell in love with her—and after that we saw a good deal of the child. Si Ismael let her go out everywhere with a French governess he had procured for her. It was an odd affair. My sister—we—grew fond of her, though she was a little beast at times. I have the marks of her teeth on my arm now. Most of the officers' wives made a pet of her—some of them because they had a penchant for Si Ismael, who was good looking and had brought his reputation already-made from Paris. Women like the d'Hannay don't make fools of themselves over a man, even when he's a half-breed, without adding to his prestige."

"But who was the child, *par exemple*?"

"I don't know. They said all sorts of things—some of them I needn't repeat. But the accepted one was that he picked her up in a dancing café at Tripoli,

and took a fancy to have her educated—to make a kind of toy of her, I suppose.”

“In course of time the girl would become a woman,” Count Cassilis observed.

“This child promised to be a pretty one,” De Colombel said, flicking at a lizard that ran under a stone.

From behind them came the ceaseless chatter of the two Arabs.

“What happened to her?” Cassilis asked at length.

“*Chi lo sa?* When I went back to Paris I sent her a big box of bonbons, through my sister. When my sister wrote, she said that the girl had gone on a visit and that Si Ismael had promised to forward the box. But from that day my sister never heard or saw her again, though Si Ismael didn’t leave Algiers to come down here till six months later. It was then——” he broke off abruptly.

“What?”

“Well, blood will tell, I suppose. . . . The girl was on the brink of womanhood. I have often wondered what Si Ismael would do with her then. He seemed so Europeanised that it is difficult to credit——”

“Is anything difficult to credit—here?”

“I should like to find out,” De Colombel said. “The child interested me.”

“Messieurs,” called Taieb, “the road is better. Will it please messieurs to ascend again.”

The two men reseated themselves in the carriage. Cassilis opened his case and offered Taieb a cigarette, and then handed it to the driver. Both Arabs made an appreciative selection.

“*Wallah!* the sidi smokes the tobacco of Egypt,” grunted the driver, chewing a little which escaped from the paper.

"We shall be in Silga soon," Taieb remarked as he lit his, indicating the distance with his elbow.

"What may 'soon' mean in hours, minutes, and seconds?"

"About two hours, sidi. Look, look!"

He pointed upwards.

Two black birds were winging steadily across the motionless blue of the sky.

The driver stood up, gathering the reins into one hand, and shouted—

"*Khouak ! khouak !*"

Taieb bubbled with mirth.

"What is it?" asked De Colombel.

But Taieb was joining in the cry too, "*Khouak ! khouak !*"

Then he turned round. "It is that ravens are flying overhead. It is necessary to call them 'brother' unless one wishes for misfortune. *Wallah !* I do not believe such nonsense."

De Colombel watched the sombre birds flap their way until they became specks too tiny for the human eye to discern.

Cassilis did not bother to glance at them, he was occupied in rolling fresh cigarettes of the tobacco of Egypt. But De Colombel was conscious of a curious thrill, as if the birds had borne him a presage on their steady way across the desert. He had an impulse to spring up and shout the brotherhood after the vanishing specks, but feared lest he should appear extravagant.

It was two o'clock before the dusty carriage entered Silga, the sacred oasis, where less than two hundred years ago a Mahomedan ascetic, Sidi Ben Azous, had

brought from Egypt the cult called by the desertmen the Way of Errahman, the fame of which stretched over the Algerian Sahara as the fame of Sidi Okbah had spread centuries before. Enemies spoke of Sidi Ben Azous as a heretic, but he preached little doctrine, and led a life of abstinence, poverty, love and charity which might have won approval from the Nazarene saint of infidel Assisi. Miracles had been worked. Sidi Ben Azous spoke with birds, fishes, and reptiles: he had the power of reading the heavens; he loved little children and healed the sick. To each of his disciples he gave a different gift, a different power, when, after their final initiation, they went out into the world.

Silga was the merest village, built of roughly dried mud bricks and surrounded by palm gardens. It owed a certain added prosperity to the fact that once a week a vast Bedouin market was held outside the town, to which caravans travelled from far and wide. The best camels could be bought there, often a good Arab greyhound, and donkeys, goats, and horses. A brace of camel foals could be picked up at bargain prices, and besides there were coffee-tents, where fresh coffee for thirsty bargainners was brewed beneath the black horsehair. Cheap calicoes, silks, jewellery and essences were sold, too—each commodity in a separate part of the encampment—in this town of tents.

On the day (March 25, 1888) upon which De Colombel and Cassilis entered Silga, however, no market had been in progression, and the streets were almost deserted. The two Arabs disappeared to stable the horses in one of the *fondouks*—for twenty years ago Silga was without an inn. There was not even an Arab *bordj* comfortable enough for European

travellers, who, if they reached thus far, brought their own tents. But De Colombel and his friend had been offered hospitality by Si Ismael, and while their guide busied himself with the disposal of the horses, they turned into a native café off the main street.

Both men were tired, and the coolness and silence of the café, whose earthen walls kept out the sun and heat, was pleasant to them. A platform of the same baked mud, covered with clean grass matting, was unoccupied save for a group of Arabs playing at dominoes, silently, as ghosts might play, except when they counted in sing-song voices. They raised soft, incurious eyes to the foreigners. The patron, the *kahwaji*, brought cups of coffee, and De Colombel and Cassilis sat on the edge of the raised platform, incongruous figures in the golden shade among the white-robed domino-players. Upon the walls a native artist, in defiance of the laws of the Koran, had sketched in black and yellow the figure of an *almée*, a soldier, the Sultan of Turkey, and a serpent. The light streamed in from the open door as day into a cavern, so intense was the glare of the spring sun without.

Presently a young Arab, in a snowy gandourah, stood in the doorway, glorified like an angel by the radiance behind him. One of the players called to him, and entering he drew a henna-stained bamboo flute from his pocket. The desert-melody that he played was low and in a minor key, full of abrupt intervals and roulades. De Colombel listened, slightly bored, but the boy came forward and stood before them, still playing.

Cassilis was sipping at his coffee with the deliberation acquired by a long sojourn in the East.

De Colombel felt vaguely irritated by the flute-player's minute scrutiny.

"Peace be with you," he said in Arabic.

The boy lifted the flute from his lips.

"To you also be peace," he returned.

De Colombel called for a coffee, and the *kahwaji* brought the third cup. The flute-player sat himself down beside the foreigners, not removing his gaze of melancholy criticism.

Presently he leant forward. "You go to see the marabout?"

De Colombel assented briefly.

Again the dark eyes were riveted upon his.

"What is the tune you were playing?" asked Cassilis.

"I have heard it before."

"It is a song of tears, *sidi*. See, when I play these two notes, thus—that is the sound of weeping. It is a woman who is lost, and her lover who seeks her."

De Colombel smiled, and fingered his moustache. He was accustomed to the picturesque phrases of the Arabs.

"Of tears," he repeated

"Yes, *sidi*, of tears."

But Taieb's announcement that he was ready to conduct them to the house of Si Ismael put an end to the conversation. The flute-player drank off his coffee, and gathering his burnous closer, ran lightly out of the café and out of sight. The two Frenchmen rose, Cassilis stiffly, and followed Taieb into the sunshine and down the street. It was tortuous, and led them across the market-place, until a second square was reached. An obliquely-built mosque stood in one corner, a couple of fig-trees thrusting broad leaves over the high wall beside it. The air quivered with heat.

A few camels knelt outside it, their hides shaggy and unkempt, their eyes closed in sleep. Flies hung about them in clouds. A low, irregular archway over which date-palms showed their crested heads faced the Europeans as they crossed the square, and towards this Taieb directed their steps. A number of Arabs sat or leaned against the wall, or crouched in the shade of the entrance. A strip of matting had been laid on the ground immediately beside it, and upon it reclined three or four boys dressed in fine white linen, reciting from a book bound in parchment. Their skins were clear, and there was a velvety bloom on their cheeks.

Taieb flung them a greeting as he passed with an air of consequence through the archway. It led into a passage. From the shadow a beggar whined a "*Meskin, meskin!*" at them. A narrow stairway led them to an upper storey, and into a plainly furnished reception-room lit by three arabesqued windows. In this room sat some seven or eight Arabs. Two were men from a distant part of the Sahara, their skins bronzed, the hoods of their gandourahs bound with camel's-hair thongs. The flute-player whom De Colombel had entertained at the café sat laughing and conversing in subdued tones with a man in one corner of the room. De Colombel noticed that he carried a rose, a white rose, which he lifted perpetually to his nostrils with a languid motion.

For a moment it seemed that Si Ismael was not yet present. Then a tall man rose from a cross-legged position on an embroidered cushion to meet them. The sight of Si Ismael, whom he had only seen in European clothes, attired in flowing robes reminiscent of the Apocrypha, at first came upon De Colombel with something of a shock.

"I hope you will pardon me for not receiving you alone," Si Ismael said, extending his hand in the European fashion, "but this is the hour of audience, and I did not wish to keep you waiting until it was over."

Upon that De Colombel introduced Cassilis, with the information that he was surveying some mines in the district above El Kantara.

Cassilis looked at his host with some curiosity. He had heard of the traditions which this man was supposed to carry on. He had heard that when the old Ben Aloui lay dying his son had travelled swiftly down from Algiers to the little mud village. What the old ascetic breathed into his ears no one knew, but from that hour Algiers and Paris knew him no longer. The mantle of Sidi Ben Azous had fallen in its turn upon the son who up to that moment had consorted with the Roumi and the infidel. It was said that Si Ismael's father, the old Ben Aloui, had spent five years in a darkened room, the *khaloua*, before he had been initiated into the knowledge which was his principal heritage. There was no record that Si Ismael had ever endured an initiation so rigorous, though the Arabs declared that he prayed through half the night after the manner of his father and grandfather, a rope hung round his neck and tied to a beam, so that relaxation meant death. They accredited him, too, with the powers of healing.

For signs of all this Cassilis searched in vain as he listened to his host's easy welcome. The most noticeable feature was his eyes, of a clear frosty blue. The magnetism of the whole man was concentrated into their small pupils.

In the next moment they were conducted by the flute-player to the quarters assigned to them. The

boy moved indolently, like a girl fresh from sleep, and smelt at his rose as he went. Si Ismael had apologised for the lack of European comforts, but the foreigners found little to grumble at in the two rooms communicating with each other which had been prepared for their reception. Except for the big Arab beds, gilded and surmounted by the crescent, the furniture was Europeanised. The thickness of the walls lessened the heat, and through the pierced windows, similar to those in the room they had just left, there arose a hum of voices like that which comes from a village school. They saw that a whitewashed courtyard lay beneath, and that students sat under the arcading, their feet drawn beneath them, reciting in a loud, monotonous voice. It was the *zaouia*, in which the youths of the neighbourhood were instructed in theology and philosophy at Si Ismael's expense. Pairs of shoes, red and saffron-coloured, were laid in rows beside the supports of the arcades. The hum was drowsy and pleasant, like the murmur of bees over heavy-scented flowers on a summer's day. It held an allurements to slumber.

The two Frenchmen washed the dust of their journey away with the European soap provided for them, and later were served with an excellent luncheon which might have been cooked by a chef. Cassilis surmised that their host had probably procured provisions from Constantine, four days' journey away. Wines were on the table, but Si Ismael did not drink of them.

It was difficult not to believe that the man who asked news of his friends in Paris and Algiers was masquerading. De Colombel noted, however, that new lines had been added to the already severe face, which he remembered some one had said resembled that of a famous Jesuit.

Si Ismael's inquiry for Madame de Rossignol gave De Colombel the opportunity he had been waiting for.

"She has just returned to Paris after spending the winter in Algiers. By the way, she asked me to be sure to give her love to your little *protégée* — Mabrouka. I hope she is well?"

"She is in excellent health, thank you."

Si Ismael busied himself with replenishing Cassilis' glass.

De Colombel broke his bread into little pieces.

"She is here?"

"She is away—on a visit. I will convey your sister's message to her. . . . You were saying, Count, a few moments ago, that you suspected the presence of iron ore beyond Macmahon . . .?"

The subject was too pointedly dropped to make it possible for De Colombel to pursue it.

He wondered what had happened to the freedom-loving child, who by this time had flowered into exotic womanhood, a womanhood of promise so delicious that it had aroused his imagination, his sense of romance. Could Si Ismael, with unexpected fanaticism, or in the jealousy inherited from generations of brutal forefathers, have shut up the singing-bird as soon as its wings had grown? He remembered the extraordinary beauty of the child Mabrouka, beauty which had stirred him even then. He remembered her brave, gay intelligence. Had Si Ismael tried to turn her into one of the cloistered dolls which fill Arab households—to make a child-bearing machine of her? He remembered hearing it said that the old Ben Aloui had chosen his Irish wife in order to ensure that his son should have brains, but that she never crossed the

threshold of his harem after the moonlit night upon which he had borne her across it to the life of the veil.

The idea gripped him morbidly; he felt hostility towards his host as towards a monster. He had experienced the same feeling when as a boy he had once watched a peasant cut the wings of a lark and blind its eyes with a red-hot needle. There was a similarity between the two, the lark and the child.

He knew that Mabrouka was not on a visit. He knew that she was somewhere behind the sun-baked, mud walls of this mysterious desert-house. What was Si Ismael? What power had been able to induce him to forsake his easy, luxurious life to become a demi-god to superstitious camel-men and villagers in a remote oasis?

After lunch Si Ismael ordered his carriage, and took his guests out to see the newly discovered Artesian well a little distance outside the village. It had an ironical history—the French had dug it, abandoning it after reaching an enormous depth. But an Arab who had spent almost all his patrimony upon dancing-girls invested the few hundred francs which remained to him in buying up the patch of ground in which the abandoned well stood. He dug three feet farther and discovered water.

CHAPTER II

TWO days passed. Si Ismael had won Cassilis' heart by giving him access to the library of Arab and Persian books, the nucleus of which Sidi Ben Azous had brought from Cairo two hundred years before. On the evening of the second day the flute-player, whom they had noticed in constant attendance upon their host, followed De Colombel out into the street, and with a muttered "Care, sidi, care! *Andek!*" pushed a folded paper into his hand.

De Colombel opened it. It was spelt oddly, but he could read the sloping characters—

"Je vous prie, monsieur, de venir me voir. Cher monsieur Pompom, venez, il y va de ma vie. Rashid vous conduira à la source artésienne ce soir, où je vous attendrai vers 9 heures. Il ne faut pas dire que je vous ai écrit, on me tuerait. Venez, venez, cher monsieur Pompom. MABROUKA."

He had a curious feeling in his throat. "Pompom" was the nickname given him by his sister in nursery days, which had stuck to him, and Mabrouka when once she had heard it would use no other.

He turned to the youth.

"You are Rashid?"

"Yes, sidi."

"You are to be trusted?"

The flute-player flushed. "Sidi——" he began.

De Colombel opened his pocket-book and handed him a note.

The boy's eyes glistened, but resumed their indolent languor as he thrust the paper money into his breast.

"You are one of the pupils at the *zaouia*?"

"Yes, sidi."

"Yet you communicate with one of the marabouts women?" De Colombel continued brutally, to test him. He had no wish to let a fanciful curiosity lead him into trouble.

The boy met his eyes without flinching, then laughed lightly.

"You know I am the friend of the marabout?" De Colombel said.

The boy hesitated. "Love is before friendship."

"I do not love."

"I love, sidi!" the boy cried in a vibrant tone.

This was unexpected. De Colombel was puzzled. If Rashid loved the girl, why should he help her to meet another man?

"You love—a woman—of—the marabout's household?"

The boy threw back his head. "I love the marabout—better than myself. He is like Allah to me. Every day I study that I may serve him; every day I study that I may receive sight at his hands. He the Great Teacher, he is my father."

"And—Mabrouka?"

The boy made a swift gesture. "A woman. What is a woman? I would have her away because she is close to him, because he consults with her, because he is tender with her. He forgets that she is a woman.

He treats her as though she were his son. He has taught her many things that it is not fitting that a woman should know."

De Colombel was frankly nonplussed. The boy's eyes were those of a fanatic.

"You are not Si Ismael's son?"

"He has no son, sidi. But I would become his son, even as he was the son of his father. No one can sing at the *khouan* like I. No one can recite the *surai* as I. He favours me above the rest and loves me. But he has instructed this woman also. . . ."

His voice was bitter with childish jealousy.

De Colombel had come against something which he was unable to comprehend.

"Very well. Await me in the square outside the *zaouia* at eight-thirty, and then conduct me to the well. If thou canst, bear a message to the woman that I will be there at nine, as she asks."

He turned on his heel and went on down the narrow street flanked by windowless houses like prisons. A string of camels laden with brushwood was coming up it, and he had to shrink against the wall to allow the slow beasts to pass with their swaying burdens. An old man, wizened like dried fruit, with black hair streaming over his shoulders and a torn burnous, sat on one of them, and as he caught sight of the French officer, bent forward and showed his teeth.

"Curse you, dog of an unbeliever!" he screamed in a thin, rasping voice. "Curse you! I see the blood between your shoulders. I see the blood on your lips. Allah is great and swift to vengeance."

De Colombel was accustomed to hear the mechanical curses of pious Moslems. But something occurred to accentuate the incident, to give it significance, as it

were. His lips were dry, and when he put out his tongue to moisten them he was conscious of the saltish, acrid flavour of blood.

It was an instance of the power of suggestion perhaps, and he smiled at the shock it had given him in the next moment as he made a mental note to tell a friend in Paris interested in such phenomena.

He lit a cigarette and strode on, taking the road that led to the Artesian well.

The sun was already setting, and as De Colombel reached the barren graveyard just outside the village, it fell upon the white tomb of Sidi Ben Azous' shrine, until the dome flamed golden and cast a long, distorted shadow over the rows of unadorned hummocks which surrounded it. There were no eulogies over these desert graves, no headstones; only a handful of clay compressed into a square lump and set at the head of each mound to indicate that the sleeper lay with his face towards Mecca. De Colombel saw his own shadow unnaturally lengthened athwart the silent place, and as he raised his arms in an involuntary movement, noticed that he had accidentally metamorphosed the shadow form into that of a cross. He walked swiftly on, as if he had committed a desecration, and turned off towards a palm garden at the left, skirting the burying-place. A dog barked at him out of the twilight. It was guarding a Bedouin *gourbi*, a rough hut protected from the wind by an impromptu fence of green bamboos, interlaced one into the other. A glittering line of yellow told him that he was nearing the object of his stroll, and soon he stood on the stone course which conducted the water from the well, some hundred yards higher up, to the palm gardens. The stream seemed as if it were of living fire, and moved

swiftly in its channel. Yet even as he looked the sun sank abruptly, and the light died, leaving the water grey and malignant. The air was still. Somewhere, not far off, he could hear the short bark of a jackal, and surmised that the creature must be feeding upon the dead donkey he had passed outside the village. A grasshopper chirped near by, and he could hear the gobbling sounds of the frogs from the green glooms of the palm plantation.

Then a certain sharpness in the breeze which struck his face reminded him of the treachery of spring evenings in the desert, and he turned and walked back to Si Ismael's house.

At dinner he recounted his adventure with the camel-driver, omitting his own illusion.

"That must have been Hamida," Si Ismael said, a curious expression flitting through his light blue eyes. "He is a diviner."

"But surely you don't believe in that sort of thing?" De Colombel cried, fighting off a sickly feeling.

Si Ismael smiled. "There is much included by 'that sort of thing.' The old man whom I pointed out to you yesterday used to say to me when I was a little child: 'Allah shows his curious things to those who study silence.' In great spaces and great silences there is opportunity to study Allah."

Cassilis gave a furtive look. It was almost the first time that their host had referred directly to his religion.

After dinner Cassilis went off with Si Ismael to examine an illuminated Persian manuscript which was one of the treasures of the library. De Colombel, excusing himself on the plea that he had papers to put in order, slipped a revolver into his pocket and made

his way out without attracting curiosity. The night was moonless, but the stars hanging low in the sky gave a grey and milky light. In the entrance he brushed against several Arabs, with whom he exchanged greetings. There was nothing strange to them in the fact that the marabout's guest should walk abroad after the evening meal. Once outside, De Colombel paused and took a deep breath. The adventure did not altogether appeal to him, and he had no mind to embroil himself in an intrigue with a native woman, especially as that woman was in the household of the head of a powerful sect, whose friendship the Government was anxious to retain. On the other hand, he was a Breton, and an adventure in which an element of romance entered was not distasteful to him.

As he strolled across the square Rashid glided forward quickly out of the shadows.

De Colombel followed him without speaking. The air was heavy, as if the freshness of spring had died with the sun. A sense of oppression seized him. They were passing the narrow street of houses that led to the western gate. A poor coffee-house, only frequented by negroes and camel-drivers, sent a solitary ray out on to the road, and from it came the sound of a drum, and of singing, nasal, inarticulate, fierce.

Rashid stood motionless a moment to listen to it. De Colombel hated native music: he could detect neither rhythm nor harmony in it. This odd little melody, sung to the thrup-thrapping of an earthen drum, annoyed him.

"What is it?" he asked impatiently.

"Sidi, it is the song of the Djinnns. The Djinni, the spirits of evil, do not like to hear that song. It was made by a holy marabout, the pupil of Ben Azous,

him to whom the magic knife was given. It is for fortunate that we hear it."

But as he spoke there was a cry from the interior and the music ceased. Before De Colombel could prevent it, the boy had rushed in. A dispute had arisen to judge by the confusion of voices.

He came out a moment later with a gloomy mien, and they moved on. Presently Rashid came closer, and spoke in his ear.

"Sidi, even while they played the drum fell to the ground and was cracked. That is a bad sign. We should go back."

De Colombel laughed. "No, we can't."

They were soon passing the cemetery and a gurgling told them they were nearing the water-course. The gourbi loomed to their left, but the dog did not bark again; it was possible that the sound of the water drowned the slight noise made by their approach.

A little farther up was the well. They kept to the course, and in another moment perceived the forms of two women, closely veiled in shapeless black haiks which barely left their eyes visible. Rashid uttered a warning "*Bishwoya*," and went up first. But one of the women, the slighter,—a black shadow with clinking anklets,—broke away and came to meet De Colombel impulsively.

"Pompom! *C'est toi!*" she exclaimed.

The young man took the two little hands that fluttered out to greet him, and noticed that though the girl was tall, they were fragile, scarcely bigger than the hands of a child.

"You are glad to see me?" she demanded in broken French.

"Of course I am glad. Weren't we the best of

friends, thou and I?" He spoke lightly, caressing her hands.

"Then you will help me," she went on eagerly in a low voice. "I knew you would help me, Pompom, I knew it."

"But I do not understand. What do you mean?"

She drew away her two hands and clasped them together in front of her, the silver bracelets falling heavily against each other like fetters, and spoke in a low, hurried voice—

"Rashid cannot understand us if we talk in French, so we need have no fear. Pompom, you must take me away—back to Algiers. It was that which I wished to say to you. I cannot remain here. I cannot bear it. I will not endure it."

He was aware of two great eyes, wet, pleading, fixed on his own. Her voice was unexpectedly contralto for so young a woman, in spite of the childish inflection, as though it had been deepened by tears.

"But, my dear child, how can I help you?" he asked, moved.

"Take me away, back to Algiers," she repeated passionately.

"Listen, Mabrouka. It is dangerous for me even to see you; dangerous for me, dangerous for you."

"You think of yourself, not of me," she replied swiftly.

"I think of us both."

"Then you do not care," she cried, with a deep sob in her throat. "I feared it. And I was so glad you had come, because you were always kind to me. I wear yet the little brooch fashioned like a bird which you gave me so long ago, knowing that you would return to help me. It was the coming of hope when

they told me that two Roumi had arrived. Nedjma—she who came with me to-night—questioned, and when she brought me the news that you were already in Silga, you and the other, we looked through a window from whence one may see the courtyard. Presently I saw you, and heard you laugh as you crossed. For that I waited two hours. Two hours are nothing when days are empty.”

Instinctively he drew her towards him and placed an arm around her shoulders, and, finding her a sweet piece of womanhood to the touch, his reason dwindled.

She pushed him away a little vixenishly.

“You say nothing!”

“What is there to say. Is Si Ismael——” He hesitated.

“Have I not begged him till my tongue is dried. I besought him to let me see thee and the other that we might talk together and be gay, and that I might hear news of the great world; and he would not. Then I came into a great rage and said I would kill myself, and when he still refused, I took a knife and ran it into the vein in my arm. But he laughed and bound it, and said a charm over it so that it could not bleed, and went away. Since then he has not approached me, nor spoken good nor evil.”

“Poor child!” He spoke in Arabic, for the other two had withdrawn to a little distance, and made another attempt to caress her. But she struck at him and pulled her veil tighter about her face. “Little wild-cat!” he exclaimed, nettled, reverting to French.

She laughed, and answered him in her own tongue.

“Once before thou calledst me a wild-cat. Dost thou remember? It was when I bit thy arm. *Wah!* I drew blood.”

He turned up his sleeve, and held out his arm to her.

She bent over it. "It is too dark."

"There is the mark of three teeth there, nevertheless."

She passed two smooth, henna-stained finger-tips over the surface. "There is no roughness. Still, I grieve that I hurt thee, Pompom." There was a richness, a sleepiness in her tones that again touched his senses. Her perfume and softness influenced him strangely.

He pulled the sleeve down again, and sobered himself.

"We must speak seriously. Thou art but a child, Mabrouka——"

She made a gesture. "Child! I am no child. I am a woman grown. Sherrifa hath a babe these twelve months, and I am older than she. Halima, the marabout's cousin, hath a young husband who loves her as the sky loves the crescent moon, and she is a year younger than I, and hath borne him two sons. All these are content, knowing nothing else."

"And thou?"

"How can I be content? Am I as they? Have I not lived as a Frank woman? My heart is sick for the things which I have not. I am as an unplucked rose which sees the summer pass."

"But thou art wedded."

Her tone grew choked. "And is Ismael a lover, thinkest thou? How can I tell thee—of the things I have suffered from him. If he beat me as men beat women I should not complain. It is good to know the strength of a man. But I am as one who having seen the sun is shut in a dark cavern. And he is like

to forbid me to breathe the air because it is free. It is only by great cunning that I am here now. He will scarcely permit me to walk on the house-top. I spend my days quarrelling with women in this palace of mud. I am not permitted to go to the mosque or to visit his cousins. There is nothing but bitterness between us. There was a time when he might have killed me and I should have kissed his hands. He makes promises to me of things I know not . . . he speaks to me of matters of which I care not."

She was silent, and through the darkness came the metallic piping of the frogs in the pools which had been dug around the roots of the palms, and a distant cockcrow. Rashid and Nedjma, a black ghost and a white ghost, were seated at a distance of twenty feet higher up the stream.

"But, Mabrouka," De Colombel temporised, "how can I help thee? What good will it bring thee to go away?"

"What good will it bring me to stay—save to grow old. Should I have asked thee if there were other means." There was forlornness in her voice. "Have I friends that I can trust? There is but thee and thy sister, and the big colonel who is far away, and the tall lady who lived high on the hill whose name I have forgotten."

He was stirred more than he cared to admit by this wild-bird beating her wings against the bars, whose being was wrapped in a mystery as impenetrable as the hawk that concealed her.

"What wonder that I am unhappy," she went on, with a kind of impatience. "I have the blood of an unveiled woman in me. There are those who will have heard of my mother, even among the French,

although she did not dance for infidels. She was celebrated, my mother, and she knew many cities and many villages. She would not dance until she had received a very large sum, and even then, for her beauty, when a rich man had commanded her, she would receive an armful of jewels. It was Nedjma who told me, she has known me since my mother gave me to Ismael. You have heard that I came from Tripoli. My mother was dancing at a wedding feast there, and she had received much gold for it. Ismael was there, and they all knew him for the son of Ben Aloui. When my mother heard it she stopped before him after the dancing, and offered him any favour he might desire, for the sake of his father. For Ben Aloui had cured her when she was possessed of a djinn at Touggourt, whither she had been taken by the Caid of Touggourt for a *fantasia*. That is a long story; Nedjma has related it to me many times. So she knelt before Ismael, and kissed his burnous so that virtue might come into her, and blessed him. I was there also, but of this I remember nothing, save of the lights and that I ate many sweetmeats and danced. So when my mother kissed Ismael's burnous and asked him to desire a favour from her, I in that moment, Nedjma says, mischievously stole his glass of perfumed syrup. And Ismael laughed, and said that he desired only one thing, and that was myself. And my mother was sad, for the dances prevent the bearing of children, and she had only me. But she gave me, knowing that to gratify the desire of a marabout would bring much good luck."

De Colombel listened curiously. He had heard of these dancers whose performances Europeans rarely have the good fortune to witness, and for whom whole

villages will contribute at seasons of festivity so as to raise the fee demanded. And Mabrouka's phrase struck him, "I have the blood of an unveiled woman."

"She earned much money. So could I," Mabrouka was saying. "I cannot live within three rooms. I must breathe. I must move swiftly. I have seen how thy women live, Pompom, and I will live as they."

"I will write to my sister," De Colombel answered mechanically.

"If she were to come here even, he would tell her that I was away. He did not permit me to send her a letter, though I can write a letter, even in French, like a skilled man."

He smiled inwardly, remembering her caligraphy and spelling.

She drew nearer to him. "They are returning. I must know if you will take me."

Nedjma and Rashid were upon them.

"It is time, my little moon," said the old woman from the folds of her rusty black haik.

Mabrouka stretched out her hands to De Colombel.

"Wilt thou take me?" she cried desperately in her broken French.

Again he felt her presence tug at his senses to an insane degree.

"It is impossible, it is impossible," he repeated stupidly.

Rashid bent quick eyes upon the two, as if eager to read the meaning of their foreign talk. But Mabrouka turned without further speech and followed the old woman into the dark palm-garden in which the frogs were croaking. De Colombel made a movement to follow them, but Rashid laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Wait! They must return before thee, and by a different route."

Then he sat down on the ledge of the water-course and let his fingers dabble into the hurrying ripples.

"Was it well, sidi?" he asked.

"It was well," De Colombel replied briefly.

"I have heard that the wife of the marabout is a gazelle. I have heard that her face is the face of a rose in the gardens of Paradise." Rashid's voice was sly and languorous; he dwelt on his similes like an epicure over choice morsels. "She is young and sugared like untasted honey in the heart of a hybiscus."

"Thine is a fool's tongue, Rashid," said De Colombel, irritated by the flute-player's manner. "It would be better for thee to hold it concerning the women of thy master's household."

Rashid received the reproof without resentment.

"*Wallah!* except to thee, my tongue is mute." He lifted his dripping fingers and wiped them on his gandourah.

"Theirs is the shorter route; if we leave now, we shall arrive a quarter of an hour later than they."

CHAPTER III

IT happened that Count Cassilis contracted a fever upon the day before that which had been fixed for the departure of Si Ismael's European guests. De Colombel had an appointment at Batna, but he waited the whole of the day upon which they were to have travelled in the hope that Cassilis' indisposition would have lessened so as to enable them to set out together. By four in the afternoon Cassilis seemed better, but was unfit for the journey. De Colombel, however, could not postpone his start longer, for his appointment at Batna was official and imperative. So, leaving the carriage for the use of his sick friend, he accepted his host's offer of two horses, one for himself and one for Taieb. The boy Rashid was to ride a third and accompany them as far as El Mara, whence De Colombel could proceed by the diligence. By riding quickly they would be likely to reach El Mara by daybreak the next morning. It was late before the horses stood outside in the little square: it was approaching dusk before they started. Si Ismael did not press the Frenchman to remain longer, and De Colombel made his adieux as he would have made them to a brother-officer whose hospitality he had been receiving. There was an agreement made that De Colombel should return for a fortnight's gazelle-shooting if he were quartered at Batna in the autumn as he anticipated.

The young officer felt no reluctance to leave his friend—the fever was not serious, and he was well provided with quinine. But of Mabrouka he thought many times. He had not seen her since the night they met at the well, but something of the perfume of her personality, something of the misery of her child's heart, reached him through the mud walls which separated them, followed him into the night when he slept in the high Arab bed with the gilded crescent, kept him awake thinking of her, her youth, the beauty which he had surmised behind the closely folded haik, and the brave, wild nature that called for freedom, that called for love. He imagined her sinking into the ugly middle-age of her race and into sapless old age, and his imagination grieved for her, as imagination always grieves at the vision of the fleetingness of youth and of all things that one would like to arrest for eternity at their most beautiful moment. He thought of the touch of her henna-stained fingers, and of the warmth and softness of her body. For he was sentimental, being a Breton, and sensual being a Frenchman who had sojourned long in an Eastern country.

As her silence remained unbroken, he began to wait eagerly for a word or token from her—another assignation. He planned a different behaviour. He would take what was put in his way—with discretion, of course; and leave her with moments of passion and romance to store in the casket of her empty life, to dream over in the long idleness of her imprisoned days. These were his night thoughts.

His daylight mood was prudence. Although he imagined her dark eyes behind the heavy mashrabiyyeh window that looked over the courtyard every time he crossed its sunny whiteness, and felt a warmth in his

veins at the thought, he feared to question Rashid, or to attempt to get a message conveyed to her. Moreover, he assured himself with something like amusement that the interest he had in her would not survive the distance to Batna. The heat, the clear silence, pure air, and sun of this desert village, the mysticism of the place, were sufficient to give unnatural importance to the affair.

But the hour for departure had come, uneventfully, and he congratulated himself, half-ruefully, on his wisdom. The evening was dark and windy, following a grey day during which the sirocco had blown continuously. Locusts had flown with the wind and were settling or crawling everywhere: the children had spent the day in catching the ungainly insects, pulling off their wings and eating them alive, or carrying them home to the women to stew.

Some dozen Arabs, the hoods of their burnouses pulled up about their ears, stood out in the square to see them start, speaking little, their robes blown against their thin legs by the sandy gusts that blew up from westward. The flute-player was superb and mysterious. Taieb eyed him with frank dislike.

The horse led up for De Colombel was a grey Arab, its breed showing in its well-shaped flanks and slender, nervous legs. But Si Ismael looked at it with surprise.

"Where is Geisa?" he asked of Rashid, who held the animal's bridle.

"Yesterday Geisa had a little sickness, sidi," he replied readily. "She is not yet entirely fit for the journey."

Si Ismael's brow clouded. "I had intended you to ride another horse," he said, addressing De Colombel.

"My own. She is a good deal swifter and better than the mare you have there."

They started. The night wind was warm and stifling, and occasionally a locust blundered against the horses on their way and set them dancing nervously. The tops of the palm-trees swayed drunkenly, and eddies of sand rose and filled the throats of the riders. De Colombel spoke little. Taieb sulked, and Rashid was silent. They were to take a different route back than that along which the carriage had travelled on the outward journey, and a half-hour's riding brought them to Farfar, another to Lischanna, small mud villages set among date-palms. Outside Lischanna Rashid reined in his horse, dismounted, and examined the animal's off hind-leg. Then he announced that his horse had cast a shoe, and that it was necessary that he should re-enter Lischanna to get the animal shod.

"Son of an owl! Why not look to the looseness of the shoe before setting out?" exclaimed Taieb, letting the stream of his fury flow forth in further references to the flute-player's parentage. "Where wilt thou find a smith at this hour?"

Rashid turned a contemptuous back upon the irritated Tunisian.

"Have I the sidi's permission to return into Lischanna? The matter will not take long. I have a cousin who is a smith there."

De Colombel gave an anathematising consent. There was little else to be done. It was getting late and he regretted the delay. There were few lights in Lischanna—it was close on ten of the clock, and most of the inhabitants of the hamlet were already abed, although, as they had ridden through the

little streets he had noticed a few Arabs still sitting over a soiled pack of cards.

He dismounted too, and let his horse drink at the little stream which watered and encircled the oasis. Taieb grumbled under his breath: there was no love lost between the two Arabs. The sky was starless, and the sand continually blew up in uneasy puffs from a near-by dune, a long ridge in the shape of a couchant monster. Something snake-like in the outline suggested a prehistoric reptile, a vast lizard like the little grey bull-headed lizards De Colombel had remarked a score of times sunning themselves in the desert.

As he watched, a feeling of idleness and fatigue lessening his impatience at the hindrance, he heard the sound of hoofs muffled in the loose sand. A horse neighed, and his own mare whinnied in return. In the next moment the horse and its riders reined a few yards from them, for there were two figures upon it silhouetted faintly against the night sky.

"Rashid!" De Colombel called sharply.

There was no reply.

Taieb came behind De Colombel and whispered in French—

"It is not Rashid. There are two, and one is a woman. I myself will ask them their business."

One rider, the man, dismounted, and came cautiously towards them, leading his horse by the bridle. De Colombel saw plainly that the second figure was that of a woman, from her shroudings. He kept one hand on his revolver.

"Peace be with thee," Taieb cried.

"To you be peace," returned the dismounted rider in muffled accents.

Taieb turned to De Colombel. "*Wallah!* It is

but a boy. These are curious fools here. He has come out to spy at us that he may report. What is thy errand with us?" he continued, speaking loudly in Arabic.

The boy came to a standstill, stroking his horse's neck. The bundle on the saddle set up a whimper.

"It is with thee I have to speak," he said, addressing De Colombel.

De Colombel stood petrified. From the first moment he recognised the voice as Mabrouka's. Then he turned to Taieb.

"I will deal with the boy and hear what he has to say. Go to a little distance."

He waited until Taieb had obeyed, then he went nearer to Mabrouka.

"I have come," she said in French.

"How dared you!" He took her roughly by the wrist. "How dared you. It was madness—suicidal madness. You must go back, now, with Rashid. Who is the other woman?"

"Nedjma."

"Good God!" he ejaculated.

"I must speak to you. Send your servant farther away; he may overhear us even now."

De Colombel took his horse by the bridle and went over to Taieb. "Take this horse and thine farther down the stream. Keep within call, and hail Rashid as he comes."

Taieb obeyed, his eyes big with curiosity, and the gloom swallowed him.

"Speak then."

"Pompom, we cannot return. We must travel with you."

"Your absence cannot be discovered yet."

"But the doors are closed." She shuddered as she used inadvertently the phrase which to an Arab means death. "They will not open to us. See, in thinking of it I said the words which prophesy what will befall us if we return."

He was silent.

"You must take me," she cried, with fear in her voice, a wild terror that upset his own nerves.

"Where can I take you, in the name of God?"

"To thy sister. To Algiers."

"That is impossible. After Batna I go to Tunis."

"Then take us with thee."

"What can I do with a couple of women?"

"No one need suspect that I am a woman. I am supple like a boy, and firm of flesh. I am the boy Salah with his aged mother travelling to Tunis. I will not burden thee. If thou goest to Tunis I can find lodging there." She had dropped into Arabic. "I have brought my jewels, which I can sell, and money."

"But we shall be followed!" he burst out. "I shall be accused of abducting you! *Dieu!* what a mess!"

She laughed. "I am no fool, thou! My absence will not be discovered till to-morrow, unless I go back. There are two who will swear that they saw us creep out to the tents of Hadi Djilani, who leaves at dawn to-morrow with a drove of swift camels. I threatened this once, and it will be believed. Rashid will testify that I was not with thee."

De Colombel thought silently. With the lessening of the danger of discovery his mind again opened to the insidious charm of the adventure.

"O my friend, thou wilt not desert me," she said rapidly, mistaking his silence, and clinging to his arm.

"I am young to die, Pompom, and I love life, I love it. By Allah, I have never lived, and you would rob me when I have my mouth to the pitcher."

"Thou wilt reward me, little moon," he answered unsteadily, his senses leaping at the touch of her.

"Should I not?" Her tone was assured, happy.

He took her into his arms.

"Listen, Mabrouka. Rashid knows?"

"He knows. He is safe."

"And if I let thee journey with me——" he said in a low, hoarse voice.

"I told thee I would reward thee. I have money. And I will pay thee much gold when I am rich, for I shall become a dancer like my mother. Oh, Pompom, it will be good to be rich! I will travel, to far countries—to Constantinople and Cairo, and into Arabia. Men shall know my name everywhere. I will have more jewels than any woman in the world. Thou shalt see——!" Her eyes were blazing beneath the heavy burnous. "I shall glitter with jewels like the sun, Pompom, so that if I danced bare save for ornaments it would seem that I was like a houri in Paradise, clothed in living light. *Wah!* That will be life indeed. I shall journey very far, I will see great cities, like a Frank woman."

There was exaltation in her voice.

Then she struggled to be free. "But let me go. . . . I like it not to be held."

He released her patiently, with a consolatory promise of the future in his heart. He wondered if she voiced the dumb rebellion of centuries, or whether she was an isolated soul emacipated by nature, or by a vagrant strain of heredity that repudiated the veil.

"Let me see thee," he said suddenly.

"It is dark." She shrank within the shadow of her burnous; habit made her pull it about her face.

He struck a match. It flickered and went out as a turbulent gust caught it. He could barely distinguish her features; but he was gladly conscious that she possessed the subtle beauty which is magnetic rather than definable, the beauty which had probably given her mother a dower of fame in a land where a woman's body is more than her soul, and where there are not two words for "I love" and "I desire."

A sound from the bowed bundle on the horse brought them both back to actualities.

She stood expectant, alert.

"We must be careful," he said to her, weighing his words. "We must be very careful. Taieb must be silenced."

"It is agreed, then?"

"It is agreed."

There was something brave and boyish about her that filled him with a sudden wave of passion, and his eyelids quivered as he looked at her.

"It is agreed," he repeated. Then he shouted, "Taieb!"

"Sidi!" came out of the distance.

"Si Ismael hath sent this boy and his aged kinswoman who is sick that we may take them with us. We must press on. Is Rashid coming?"

"He is already here, sidi."

"Then we must journey on."

"Good, sidi."

And four horses rode that night into the darkness.

CHAPTER IV

IN the narrow street of the Kasba, in the city of Tunis, there was, about the year 1888, a dirty yellow-white building with green shutters, across whose front was emblazoned, in black paint which had partly peeled away in the sun, the words "Albergo del Sole." It was sandwiched in between a Maltese grocery and a Jewish meat-shop, and wore a declassed, expatriated look even in that street of incongruities. It was taller than its neighbours, and from the window of the top floor it was possible to look over the flat roofs to the Dar-el-Bey and count the minarets in the quarter of Medina, as far as the Bab Djazira. And below, bright awnings were spread, and all day long the cries of the vendors could be heard, and the constant shuffling of loose slippers. So narrow was the street that the sun only penetrated it at midday.

The noonday flag had just been unfurled from the Great Mosque in the upper city, and the voices of the muezzins had sounded far over the white house-tops for the third hour of prayer, when an officer in the uniform of the Chasseurs walked up the street of the Kasba and entered the Albergo del Sole, nodding in the doorway to the untidy Italian *padrona*, a stout woman with a moustache, who was shelling peas inside.

He briefly questioned this saturnine giantess. "Upstairs?"

She inclined her head, setting her double chin a-shaking.

"They have kept within the house?"

"The old one went out yesterday, and after sundown the young one with her. Monsieur goes up? He knows the way."

She fell to shelling her peas again, and De Colombel made his way up the creaking stairway to the top storey. Arrived, he knocked at the door which faced him. He had to repeat the knock several times before it was slowly opened, and that grudgingly. A woman's face, yellow like Japanese ivory and lined with age, filled the space between the door and the wall.

"How goes it, Nedjma?"

"Well, sidi, well." She widened the space with reluctance, and he entered quickly, pushing her aside.

"Where is Mabrouka?" he asked, looking about the ill-furnished and empty room.

Nedjma hesitated.

"She is still ill, sidi. The little moon is sick in this strange country."

De Colombel swore impatiently.

"I have had enough of this. She must be better since she had strength to go out yesterday."

"To go out, sidi? She hath not left her bed."

"She went out, and that into the night air. It is useless to lie to me"

"It is not I who lie. The carrion, the she-dog below——"

"Peace, peace! I will ask thee nothing more. I must see Mabrouka."

The old woman's face twisted with anxiety.

"But——"

He strode past her to a second room, turned the

handle of the door and went in. The shutters had been partly closed to exclude the fierceness of the sun, and hot light lay in bars and streaks on the bare floor.

"Mabrouka!"

She turned to confront him, her eyes ringed with purple but her oval face pale with the clear pallor of perfect health. As she looked at him, a brown-red colour inundated her cheeks.

"I will not see thee."

"God! I must see you," he cried, using his own tongue. "I have not known a moment of comfort since you broke away from me at Batna. Do you think I traced you here for nothing? for amusement? out of curiosity?"

She made no answer, but stood motionless, except for her quick breathing—an odd, barbarous figure in her magenta and scarlet robes.

"You need me," he said more gently. "It is impossible for you to remain here alone. What do you know of life? What chance have you? There is no reason why you should not permit your only friend to see you, to help you. Come, do not be a little fool."

He went close to her, and took her into his arms tentatively, expecting an outburst.

"Do not drive me away," he said close to her ear in Arabic. "I cannot let thee go. Thou art as my very breath."

She listened, half frightened, like a child; her mouth set and mutinous, her heavy eyebrows, joined by a pigment, brought down frowningly over her eyes.

"I have hungered for the sight of thee," he whispered, using the old phrase of Arab lovers, but she suffered his kisses on her closed eyelids automatically, and De Colombel released her of his own accord.

"Let me return," she said in low, tense tones, finding her tongue at last.

"To death?"

"I care not. I shall die in this place if I stay."

"What of thy freedom?"

"But I am not free," she cried, with a great sob. "Thou hast deceived me. I hate thee."

"It is thou who art the breaker of compacts."

"How could I tell that my jewels would be stolen from me," she answered, with a breaking voice. "Have I not promised thee ten times what I had . . ."

"I am thy lover, Mabrouka. Do I ask for thy money?"

"It was for money that we agreed."

"The agreement was not mine."

"I hate thee, I hate thee!" she returned passionately.

"I have offered to buy thee new jewels."

"What are jewels to me? Thou dog, thou dog!"

Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. He stared into her quivering eyes, and then, as if throwing off a madness, gave a short laugh and sat down abruptly on the edge of the wide divan spread over with a bright red *duvet*.

"Give me something to drink, in the name of Allah."

She went to a corner, and stooping down returned with a glass full of a cloudy liquid.

He drained it, and she stood looking at him a long while without speaking to him. He balanced the glass on his knee.

"What is it now?"

She made no answer

"Take the glass."

She took it from his hand, and he attempted to pull

"I meant that it was a pity since they were stolen with the rest."

Mabrouka turned round, but checked her speech before it had reached her lips.

"Thou art not angry with me, little moon?" quavered the old woman.

Mabrouka seized the old woman with something between a cry and a laugh. "I love thee as my soul, little mother. . . . Give me thy bracelets."

Nedjma only succeeded in drawing off some half-dozen of her bangles. The others had been slipped on when her hands were slender and supple, and refused to leave her wrists. A silver chain, hung with charms, followed their migration—all Nedjma's poor little stock of jewellery.

Mabrouka surveyed herself, lifting her chin to the dim glass, and turning her head from this side to that, like a brilliant plumaged parroquet, vivid, strange, and beautiful.

"They are not as fine as my own"

"They become thee, nevertheless, *aini*," said the old woman. "I would Ismael could see thee . . ."

And suddenly, Mabrouka slipped to the ground at her feet and sobbed

CHAPTER V

IT was the fashion among the French officers stationed at Tunis to dine at the Hotel Gigino, a small Italian hotel-restaurant just within the Arab quarter. The cuisine was excellent, and in hot weather there was the advantage of a cool stone verandah into which a number of small tables could be crowded.

De Colombel sat himself at one of these, and a man in civilian dress beside him greeted him.

"You are going to Madame Tresali's to-night?" he asked, leaning back in his chair to converse.

"I suppose so—for a short time."

"*Comment donc?* And the beautiful reason?"

De Colombel shrugged his shoulders. "Dances bore me."

"The Tresali will be disappointed."

"What are you saying!"

"*Mon cher*, at the reception the other day every one remarked the particular attention paid to you."

"I noticed no such attention."

The other man laughed.

"You are wise. But, Saint-Georges, the fair diplomatist's latest acquisition, is ready to devour you."

De Colombel yawned slightly over the menu.

"To tell you the truth, Bourdon, the lady is too old, too famous, and too catholic."

"It is just that which makes her amusing."

"I admit it."

A third comer interrupted the conversation, and De Colombel finished dinner and proceeded to his own room.

An hour later he was shaking hands with his hostess.

Madame Tresali had taken a prominent part in Tunisian politics. It was said that the French occupation was brought about peaceably through her agency. Born an Italian, she had worked for the French Government throughout, and had utilised her friendships—she was a woman of remarkable beauty even though she had passed her fiftieth year—to great advantage in her diplomatic career. General Tresali, an amiable man addicted to gambling, had held a high position in the Bey's service, but his wife had long ago been recognised as the master spirit in their partnership. Her jewels and dresses were celebrated, her receptions more brilliant than those given at the Résidence.

This was the woman who shook hands with De Colombel.

"I have to speak with you presently," she murmured in an undertone, as she turned from him to the next comer. "Come back to me in an hour's time. I shall be able to escape then."

De Colombel bowed.

He did not like Madame Tresali, beautiful and intelligent as she was. He hated an *intrigante*. He disliked a woman whose reputation had been coloured through as many agencies as hers.

He wandered into the salon where the dancing was taking place, and finding he knew few people, went into the baccarat room adjoining. He moved like an automaton: his body was present, but his mind was neither with the crowd of well-dressed women and

men who were laughing and talking together in the dancing salon or playing at the tables. He noticed one of Madame Tresali's intimates, a beautiful young Sicilian woman, near the dealer, her shoulders showing above her satin gown, her golden head set well upon them. She was examining her hand. He looked at her curiously. In a moment she glanced up at him, smiled, and inclined her head, and played her last card. The game was over; some of the players retained their seats, others rose and relinquished their places to those waiting to play. She gathered her skirts in one hand and came towards him.

"You look like a sleep-walker to-night, M. de Colombel."

"That is strange. You have precisely expressed my feelings."

"It is not a compliment to—*nous autres*."

He laughed. "You, Signora Scarfi, would have the power to recall any wandering spirit."

"When I saw you a moment ago I said to myself, 'That man is obsessed,' and, pardon me,"—she spoke with greater gravity,—"I added to myself, 'He is in some great danger.'"

"In danger? I am in no danger."

"I hope not. My husband constantly blames me for such fancies. But I am a Bastiagnini by birth, and descended from a miracle-working saint! and that is said to give one second sight; though I am bound to admit," she laughed, "that my intuitions are far from infallible. I expect I am mistaken in your case."

"If you call a man who is intoxicated," said De Colombel, speaking recklessly, "in danger; then I suppose I am in danger. But I recognise that the intoxication is trivial and will pass."

"This intoxication — is it mental, spiritual, or physical?"

"The three are interdependent, are they not? I think, however, that the physical predominates."

"Aided, I am sure, by imagination."

"If you will."

She looked at him, closed and opened her fan. "It is danger of another sort of which I am conscious."

He laughed. "I have made much of a nothing to you. In reality there is not a more serenely minded person in this room."

"I know that. You are even happy. That is the intoxication of which you speak, is it not? But I cannot rid myself of the feeling that you should be careful. That you must be careful."

She spoke with an earnestness which surprised him. It occurred to him that she might suspect him of being in love with Madame Tresali. She might have heard his hostess' aside to him.

"You will misconstrue my interest in you yet," she continued, smiling, as if she had read his thoughts; "and I have promised the next dance to my husband, who is yawning already." Giovanna Scarfi was of better birth than her husband, Ciccio Scarfi, a shipping agent of no particular importance, but her fidelity to him was reputed in a town where a list of discontented wives was verbally circulated among the bachelor residents.

De Colombel looked after her with a feeling of regret, as with a slightly bored air she went towards her waiting husband. Then the consciousness that in an hour's time he would be holding Mabrouka in his arms ran like a warm fluid through the veins in his body. The crudeness, the softness, the strangeness of

her, roused his passion as no woman of his own race had been able to rouse it. With every repulse she had given him this passion had grown. Pique and resentment aided its growth. He had laughed at it in himself at first, but now it had assumed the dimensions of an intoxication, as he had called it.

He had encountered a nature far more complex than he had anticipated, a character more subtle than he had expected, a soul more barbaric and simple. At Batna, where she had realised that they were at cross purposes, after a stormy scene she had succeeded in escaping altogether, and he had only traced her to Tunis through the agency of Rashid. She had had her jewels and money stolen *en route*, and was forced to accept his help; but refused to see him again, under the plea of illness, until to-day. And to-night——

He was roused from his thoughts by a touch on his sleeve, and, looking round, saw Madame Tresali at his elbow.

"Let us go on to the balcony," she said in a subdued voice. "We shall be able to talk better there."

He followed her through the folding windows. Characteristically, the street and city had been screened off by a latticework, and an arrangement of paravents and palms converted the whole balcony into an admirable whispering place, for flirtation or intrigue. She chose the farthest corner and sat down. He followed her example.

"Now, M. de Colombel, I have heard that you know Si Ismael ben Aloui—that you were staying at his house, in fact."

"I have just returned."

"An interesting personality, I should think."

"Interesting, decidedly."

"It is about him that I wanted to ask you: I think that my husband and I will be making a shooting expedition in the neighbourhood, and it would be so very charming of you to give us a letter of introduction."

"I shall be delighted. But your husband, who is so well-known and in touch with so many Arabs of importance, should find a letter from me superfluous."

"It would be nicer, I think, to take a letter from one of his personal friends. I must admit that I am very curious to see him. Do tell me a little about him—how he lives. It is such a violent transition—from Paris to sainthood in a desert village. And they say he is so handsome—just like his Irish mother."

De Colombel did not feel inclined to pursue the subject.

"You probably know as much about him as I. I have the feeling that I am dealing with an Oriental when I am with him—in spite of the Irish mother."

"You interest me—tell me what he talks about. When I was dining at the Résidence the other day, they spoke of him as one of our greatest safeguards in the South—politically speaking. That he was heart and soul with us—with the French. Did you get that impression?"

"We didn't discuss politics."

"His father was responsible for the rising in '71."

"So I heard."

"But then the father——" She hesitated. "M. de Colombel," she went on, speaking as if from impulse, "I do not mind telling you that our visit to him is partly for political reasons. And I want you to help us as far as possible. I may tell you, also, that my husband knows nothing of my reason for accompanying him."

"I am sorry, but beyond giving you a personal introduction I can do nothing. As I tell you, we did not discuss politics; only sport, mining, and such matters."

"But he is a bigoted Mahomedan?" she persisted.

"A Mahomedan, certainly, but too broad-minded to be styled bigoted. On the contrary, he spoke of Cardinal Lavigerie¹ in a friendly way."

"Yes, yes; His Eminence told me."

He knew that she was anathematising him as a fool of the first water.

"Well, I must go back to the salon. But we start the day after to-morrow. Could you come in and dine with us, *en famille*, to-morrow?"

He reflected that to stand well with Madame Tresali was to stand well with one or two other people of importance. He would use discretion.

"I will come with pleasure."

"I'm so glad. Well, at eight then."

She rose graciously, and he kissed one of her diamond rings, wondering as he did so which of her many pasts was responsible for it.

Half an hour afterwards he left the house, and returning to the hotel, unlocked his valise and took out of it a parcel which he had placed in it early in the afternoon. Then, still in evening dress, he went downstairs again, was salaamed by the sleeping Arab porter at the foot of the stairs, and passed into the square. The moon was too young to give any light, but the night was not dark. He turned into the Rue de la Kasba. It was deserted and still, but he walked warily to escape slipping on pieces of garbage. It took him about ten minutes to reach the Albergo del Sole. He

¹ Cardinal Lavigerie: who restored the primatial See of Carthage in North Africa, and did so much to missionise Tunisia and Algeria.

knocked at the door. It was opened after great delay by the Italian *padrona*, more dishevelled than ever, her rusty black bodice bursting at the breast, her skirt crushed, her hair hanging in loose black strands.

"I thought monsieur was never coming," she grumbled. "It is past midnight."

"You can go to bed now. You may be sure I will not forget your loss of beauty-sleep."

He went up the stairs eagerly, the pulses in his throat and ears beating as loudly as his heart, and found the door at the head of the stairs already ajar. Nedjma was looking out, anxiety in her wrinkled eyes.

He entered. The room bore a festival air. The women had procured sweetmeats adorned with patterns in adhesive tinsel, sugar-cakes, and perfumed pastries; the *barkloua*, *reba*, and *m'loeb*s dear to the heart of the Tunisian confectioner, and had set them upon the floor in small dishes, ready for eating. Candles had been obtained, and the garish bedspread and two blankets of bright Manchester manufacture served as carpets and tablecloth. The atmosphere was heavy with the scent of burnt spices.

Mabrouka stood before him in the centre of the room. In the swaying light of the candles, which had been placed on the ground to illuminate the gala meal, her scarlet and magenta robes glowed with the rich colour of the hearts of roses, or of the red threads of fire that live in blood-coloured opals. There was something flame-like and tropical about her that caught him by the throat. He noticed the great earrings in her ears, the charms inscribed with unfamiliar characters round her neck.

"Peace be with you," she said in her own tongue.

He went to her and kissed her.

"You are beautiful, *mon Dieu!* you are beautiful, you little savage."

She endured his embrace as before, without either repulsing or returning it.

"Is it true? Am I so beautiful? Am I as good to look upon as the women at the ball to-night?"

The comparison was so impossible that he laughed as he sat down, somewhat uncomfortably, on the low stool placed ready for him.

"Thou art so different, my heart. Don't let us talk of them."

"Where are my jewels?" she asked carelessly, sitting on her heels by the candles.

"I have brought them."

She scanned him, an odd expression in her eyes.

"We will eat first," she said.

Nedjma returned with the coffee, placed ready on a brass tray, and sat down cross-legged beside her mistress.

De Colombel could neither eat nor drink, though in any case his appetite would not have risen to the cakes which the old woman and girl set before him. Nedjma sucked at them with toothless gums: Mabrouka began one, but it was with apparent effort that she nibbled at it. Finally she laid it down.

"I cannot eat. I must see the jewels thou hast brought me."

"Thou art a little Jewess," he said, using the insult teasingly.

She narrowed her eyes, but said nothing.

Without further words he produced the packet he had slipped into the pocket of his coat and handed it over to her. He had brought her a gold chain, a large turquoise pendant set round with matrix emeralds, an uncouth piece of native jewellery which he had bought

for the pleasure of seeing it upon her; and a bracelet of French workmanship. She took them up one by one and weighed them in her hand, holding them to the candles as if to appraise their value.

"Did they cost thee much?" she asked at length seriously.

"More than I can afford," he laughed.

She took them up once more, and examined them.

"Tell me. How much did this cost? And this? And this?"

He told her.

Nedjma made no comment, but her eyes gleamed beneath their wrinkled lids like the eyes of a bird as she followed every movement of her mistress's fingers. Mabrouka took the baubles in one hand and dropped them into the palm of the other with a tinkling, metallic sound.

"Thou art pleased?" he asked.

"Yes. I am pleased. But, I had hoped for——" She hesitated, and then pointed to the studs in his shirt-front.

"You had hoped for diamonds?" he said, with amusement. "Well, I am not a millionaire, and I could not give you these—they were a present from my great-aunt, and of considerable value."

He took out one, and she placed it between her fingers and thumb to hold it to the light.

"It glitters," she said. "It is like little swords."

The stone flashed in the light.

"One would think that there was something alive in it that could not get out," she went on, turning it again. "It is because of that that it pleases me." She handed it back to him, and he began to replace it. As he did so, she leant close to him with a sudden soft gesture. Losing control of himself, he put his arms about her.

She made a momentary struggle, and then, with the same new submission, was passive under the kisses which he rained upon her mouth and throat, although her eyes narrowed again. He did not see the hate in them.

"Let me go," she said when she could speak. "The stone has fallen."

"I do not care——" His breath came unevenly.

"But I have not finished eating."

He released her slowly, with the epicure's reason for restraint.

"Well, then, let us find the thing."

She went forward on her hands among the highly coloured cakes and the flickering candles.

"I do not see it. It must have rolled away."

He went down on his knees beside her to search.

"It may have fallen beneath the rug," he suggested.

She rose from her hands and knees to her feet.

"I will hold the candle here, so that thou wilt have light from above. It cannot have rolled far."

He continued to search among the folds of the rug. The diamond was valuable, and he had no mind to lose it.

Nedjma made no movement to help them, but sat opposite watching them. Presently she laughed, a thin, hysterical laugh.

And at that moment De Colombel felt a swift thrust and a sudden biting agony. He swayed and caught his breath blindly.

"God! you have stabbed——"

He did not complete the sentence. There was a gleam in his eyes, and the steel went home, for the second time, into his throat. He fell forward inertly, blood welling rapidly from his mouth. The great darkness had fallen upon him.

Nedjma laughed for the second time. Her body

shook, but she had not stirred from her position on the floor.

"Help me," Mabrouka said to her in low tones. "We shall have need of the diamonds."

But Nedjma made no movement.

Mabrouka bent down, her face colourless but her lips firm, and unfastened the other two studs from the dead man's bloodstained shirt-front. The third was already in her hand. Then she took the chain and the other baubles which he had given her, tore off a corner of the rug, and made them into a bundle, which she thrust into her bosom. Then she took two heavy haiks from a drawer in the rickety Italian bureau.

"Come," she said in a strained voice. "We must be quick. Thou must bestir thyself."

She forced the old woman to her feet, and helped her to don her haik. Then she paused for a second and put on her own.

"Now open the door and go down before me. I will close it and lock it after me."

Still shaking from head to foot, the old woman obeyed her.

Mabrouka stood for one moment at the threshold, looking at the huddled figure in the centre of the room. One of the candles had fallen with the unextinguished flame towards the dead man's head, and the heat had begun to lick and singe the hair. She went over once again, and, stooping, extinguished the candle. For an instant she waited as if in consideration. Then she spat on the dead man's face as she had spat at the ground he had stood upon that morning, and, drawing her haik up so that all but her eyes was invisible, she closed the door softly behind her, locked it, and crept down the darkened stairs.

PART II

THE VEILED CITY

[NOTE.—*A period of nineteen years has elapsed between Part I. and Part II.*]

CHAPTER I

"*CHE ora?*" called a fresh voice from a second-class berth on board the steamboat *Aurore* of the Navigation Mixte, which plies between Sicily and North Africa. Then, as the half-awakened traveller realised that he was no longer in the land of soft vowels which had been still in sight as he had left deck the previous evening, he changed the demand into French.

"Six o'clock, monsieur," said the passing steward.

"Land in sight?"

"But yes, monsieur."

The young Sicilian sprang out of his berth. The German above him grunted and turned over again to sleep. Riccardo Bastiagnini looked at him, for the red curtains had been drawn back to give the perspiring sleeper air. He had thrown off his coverlet, and displayed his whole unshapely form in ill-fitting pyjamas.

"These Germans!"

The young man ran his hand contentedly down the muscular outline of his own hip.

Fifteen minutes later he stood on deck, his eyes fixed on the horizon. The sea was the ardent blue-purple of the South; he had seen it as blue a thousand sunny days at Palermo, gentian blue, turquoise blue, veronica blue; wine purple, sunset purple, and the purple of storms, broken by the greens of chrysoprases and emeralds. The sun, glittering like a mass of sequins on the waves and blinding him from the white deck, meant as little to him as water to the lotus, or air to the lark; it was his element; he was a child of the sun. But to him there was something new even in the aspect of the sea and sun, for they were within sight of Africa.

His eyes were fixed with eagerness on the nearing land, rising hardly the breadth of a butterfly's wing from the sea. That strip held his future life. He gazed at it fascinated.

A lean man resting on the taffrail regarded the boy with attention. He was dressed in easily-fitting grey flannels, and wore a wide felt hat which obscured his face.

"It is the first time that you visit Tunis?" he questioned in Italian.

Bastiagnini assented, noting, with some curiosity as to his nationality, his long-shaped eyes, which were of a light blue. "And you, monsieur?"

"I live in Tunis. But I am more or less of a traveller."

"A traveller," Bastiagnini repeated, with some wistfulness. "I have never left Sicily till now."

The stranger smiled. "And yet there is only a twelve hours' journey between you and North Africa."

"That is true. But I do not travel for pleasure. I have always wished to make the journey. There is

Moorish blood in my family, so that the desire may be atavistic."

The stranger glanced at him quickly, but offered no comment.

Bastiagnini's eyes, like a woman's, were peopled with dreams as he looked towards the shore.

"Do you see Carthage?" the stranger asked, indicating the shore.

Bastiagnini leaned forward.

"Where? . . . that little white town?"

An amphitheatre of mountains, blue as ripe grapes, had sprung out of the sea, sloping down to level hills flushed as with inner fire.

"No, that is Sidi-bou-Said; just above it. Don't you see a huge white building above that pinkish spit?"

"Yes."

"That is the cathedral. It is right on the Byrsa, the citadel of Dido's Carthage. A mock-Oriental monstrosity. A symbol."

Bastiagnini felt no such æsthetic revolt. The exceeding whiteness and meretricious effrontery of the building, set like a beacon on the hillside, filled him with pleasure. The two men watched the African shore in silence. They came right under the yellow hills of Carthage, passed the lighthouse promontory with its tamarisks and the low white houses of La Goletta, and slipped into the narrow, oily green canal which is the high road to Tunis. A couple of feluccas, daubed with Mahommedan signs in orange paint, darted past them into the open sea.

"There is always a fresh breeze off Carthage," said the man with light blue eyes.

Before them, at the end of the canal, lay Tunis—

white as summer clouds against the mountains and fleckless sky. A quartette of dark-faced men in red fezes had rowed up to the ship's side, and the pilot, a wiry little Frenchman, clambered up on deck.

"How long before we reach Tunis?" asked Bastiagnini of his companion.

"Another half-hour, I fear. You are intending to stay there any length of time?"

Bastiagnini made a gesture. "Who knows? A lifetime, maybe."

"A pleasant town," said the other urbanely, offering him a cigarette, "even for a lifetime."

Bastiagnini refused with the Sicilian backward jerk of the head. "I seldom smoke."

"So you are going to settle in Tunis," the stranger said, after a slightly sardonic scrutiny of the young man's person. "You have relations there?"

"An uncle and cousins. I am going to Tunis to help my uncle in his business; his health is slightly failing."

"I hope that it may prove remunerative."

"I hope so too. I studied the law in Girgenti, but in Sicily," and the young man laughed sunnily, "there are five lawyers to every litigant, and I did not care to make the sixth."

"You were wise," said his acquaintance. His eyes dwelt upon the young face with its clear dark outlines and beautiful mouth. "It is possible I know your uncle."

"His name is Scarfi."

"The shipping agent. I have met him I think. But you do not resemble him."

"He is a relation by marriage. My uncle's people are lemon merchants and exporters at Palermo, but my

aunt was my father's sister, and a Bastiagnini." He turned a signet ring on one hand and displayed a coat-of-arms.

"That's the coat-of-arms in one of the North chapels in the Matrice at Girgenti," the other replied, examining it.

"You know Sicily then," Bastiagnini exclaimed. "One of our ancestors built the chapel. It would have been better for us if he had founded a fortune with the money."

"Then to-day the Bastiagnini are poor?"

Riccardo shrugged his shoulders. "They live. They even keep up a carriage. But they consider it disgraceful to work. As for me, I am not ashamed of our bourgeois connections or of work, so I have come away to join my uncle. Besides, one cannot live for ever in Palermo and Girgenti."

"That depends," said the other. "You might have married a fortune."

"I prefer to make one. Besides, there are few Sicilian heiresses. An American? No, they either make jealous wives or coquettes. Besides, I have no desire to marry. . . . Are the Arab women beautiful?" he asked, to divert the conversation from himself. "I do not mean the dancers, I am told they are hideous, but the women who are veiled."

The stranger closed and opened his light blue eyes meditatively. "I advise you to content yourself in the European quarter. All that is veiled is not beautiful. There are plenty of Frenchwomen with whom you will be safe in an adventure if you are discreet. It is a military town. Then there are your own countrywomen, and Jewesses and Germans—every nationality. But, veiled women," he glanced at the

beauty of this child of the sun, and concluded, "leave them alone if you are fond of life."

Something harsh in his tone surprised Riccardo.

The stranger caught his look, and added in a lighter vein—

"As for the dancers, you were correctly informed. There is one dancer, however, who is worth seeing. You should go to see her dance one evening. Europeans seldom get the chance, but a card from me will secure you an entrance. It will be best to go unaccompanied. You will be perfectly safe. I will scribble the address for you on one of my own cards."

He drew out a card-case, extracted a card, wrote on its back and handed it to the Sicilian. Riccardo read on the one side, "Ali Habib, 3 Rue des Montagnes," on the other, "Charles Conradin, 3 Rue du Caire."

"You must also come to see me."

"I shall have much pleasure. You are very good."

Conradin looked at him kindly. "I may have some business to put into your way, later on."

"I ask for nothing better," Bastiagnini laughed. The thin morning air and the sea wind filled him with the spirit of adventurous youth. The canal-banks slipped past them like moving serpents. Tunis grew nearer, and like all Oriental cities, lost something of her beauty and mystery as the veil of distance dropped away. But her whiteness remained unflecked. White terraces and white houses leapt out of the blue depths of the sky. The whiteness was transcendent. It was not negative, it was positive, and vibrated with intensity like a colour. Here and there a minaret rose like an asphodel against the sky.

"Look!" Conradin pointed. A line of what might

have been seagulls or foam lay on the water a quarter of a mile away.

"What is it?"

"Flamingoes. Wait, they are just moving. Their sentinels have given them the signal."

As the words fell, the white line had risen into the air, and became rose-coloured as the sun caught their pink breasts and wings. It was another miracle of the roses; a tress of flame drawn across the African sky. They swept seaward, crossed the mouth of the gulf, and disappeared behind the mountains which guarded the west.

They were close to the wharf now, and porters of every shade had scrambled aboard, some of them clad in the naïvest of garments, but always with a fez to cover their sacred baldness.

They attacked the first-class passengers first, as likely to have more baggage. Bastiagnini had little enough, and he guarded it from the porters who besieged him.

"*Au revoir* then," said Conradin, extending his hand. "I must go and see after my baggage and deliver it to one of these locusts. I hope you will find time to see me soon."

They shook hands, and Bastiagnini stared after him with a feeling of regret. He did not know whether he had been attracted or repulsed by his fellow-passenger, but he certainly felt a desire to see him again.

The gangway was not down yet, and he soon forgot his acquaintance in scanning the motley crowd on the wharf in the endeavour to see if any of his relations were among them. He had never seen his Uncle Ciccio, nor any of his Scarfi relations. He anticipated that his cousin Salvatore might be companionable; he

must be nineteen, the same age as himself. Then there was Gioconda, a girl of seventeen, and her sister Annunziata, only fifteen. If any one came to meet him it would probably be his uncle.

Presently his eye fell on the upper deck. The light-eyed man with whom he had been talking, M. Conradin, was conversing with a tall Arab who must have sprung on the boat from the shore. The Arab was elaborately dressed; a pale blue cloak was flung over his shoulder, his wide sash was embroidered, and a spotless white turban of some silken material was wound about his fez. Riccardo marvelled at the dignity of the man. But he did not find that Conradin lost by comparison. There was an air of authority about him, an aristocracy of manner which again set Riccardo surmising without success as to his nationality.

The gangway was drawn now, and he saw both men descend and disappear into a closed carriage which was waiting behind the *douane*.

Riccardo turned a languid back on the hotel touts who had swarmed on board; and they hastened on, like a plague of flies, to their next victim. Out of the sea-breeze the sun smote fiercely down, though it was little after eight. The young Sicilian drew back into the shade of the under deck. "Only Englishmen and dogs walk in the sun," runs the Sicilian proverb.

From this vantage he considered the faces of the quay again. A thin-faced little man, wearing a somewhat soiled Panama, was shouldering up the gangway. Riccardo's instinct told him that this was his Uncle Ciccio. The next moment the little man was peering into his face, wringing his hands, and embracing him effusively.

"Welcome, *mio caro*! Welcome! Where is your luggage?"

Riccardo indicated his slender belongings.

His uncle shouted over the taffrail—

"Achmed! Achmed!"

An Arab in full white breeches ran swiftly up the gangway, shouldered the luggage and preceded them to the Custom-House.

The official before whom the bag had been deposited greeted them civilly, and Achmed took the valise again upon his shoulder. Riccardo noticed that there had been no pretence of examining it.

"Is Signor Rospigni well?" asked Ciccio Scarfi.

"He is within. Do you wish to speak to him?"

"No. Perhaps you will tell him to call at my office this evening."

"I will tell him." The official saluted him.

"You see, I am well with the Custom-House officials," said Ciccio in brief explanation. "Rospigni is a Sicilian, and a friend of ours."

As he spoke a shade crossed his face.

"Who is he?"

"Ah, I forgot. He is the head official down here at the *douane*. . . . We will walk back, it is not far, and no carriage can drive through the Arab quarter—we are living in the Medina quarter, you know. It is a good deal cheaper than the French town, and is quiet and clean. There is the additional advantage of being at a comfortable distance from Little Sicily."

Riccardo looked an inquiry.

"Don't you know that there is a Little Sicily in Tunis—the Sicilian quarter? The riff-raff that can't afford to go to America come here instead, the saints curse them!"

Ciccio Scarfi spoke with an excess of feeling, and again Riccardo observed mentally how unhealthy and nervous he looked.

"Our offices are in a fine position," his uncle continued, with a touch of pride. "Just off the Avenue de France—you'll see them to-morrow."

Riccardo, the untravelled, cast his eyes this way and that. Except for the Arabs that mixed with the European crowd, he might have been in a French town, with boulevards, tram-lines, rows of trees and advertisement pillars. Nothing but an Arab here and there, and an occasional bundle of a woman swathed in her haik—covered completely but for her eyes and the bridge of her yellow nose—told him that he was in Africa; except the feathery palms—and of these there were plenty in Palermo.

He looked at the women with interest. They were symbolical to him of the unexplored, the possible, the mysterious. The few that he saw here, however, were obviously old and of the poorer class. There were no suggestions of rounded flesh under their enveloping draperies. He was suddenly reminded of the conversation on the steamer.

"I met a Monsieur Conradin on the boat, who said that he had met you," he remarked during the next pause.

"Conradin? I don't know the name. . . . I never heard it. A Frenchman?"

"He did not look a Frenchman. I do not know. He invited me to see him."

A look of apprehension flashed into the eyes of the little man. It was only momentary, but Riccardo was swift of observation.

"You are sure that he was not an Italian?"

"Certain. He spoke Italian with a slightly foreign accent. Why?"

"Merely that it is unwise . . . I mean . . . I should not make friends with any of the Sicilians here who are not . . . our friends."

Riccardo made no answer, and his uncle continued his conversation without waiting for one.

"Yes, we do well to live in the Arab quarter," he was repeating as if in refrain.

"It is clean?"

"Oh, the Arabs this side of North Africa are a clean race. Their ideas about drainage were primitive until the French came, but that's all altered now. I remember those old days. Why, in the summer the stench beat the filthiest back slum in Palermo, bad as that is, the Blessed Mother knows. But even then they were keen about whitewashing. The town was a whited sepulchre."

They had turned off the main street into a narrow, vaulted passage.

"You'll find it a little difficult to remember the way to our house at first," his uncle remarked. "The great thing to remember is that it is off the Souk el Belat, and once there, it is easy to find the Street of the Treasure, and the Street of the Five Fingers, and that leads you straight into the Medersa-es-Slimania, where we live."

It was not a lucid explanation, but the names of the streets pleased Riccardo, and his attention was absorbed by the high, narrow byway through which they were passing. The transition from West to East had been so sudden, so surprising. Here the European quarter terminated abruptly. That the uneven, whitewashed walls on either side concealed dwelling-houses was proved

by their wooden doors, into which worn, copper-headed nails had been hammered to form odd and intricate designs. The door-knockers were solid and antique. The few windows which broke the blank surface of the walls were high, and heavily latticed by worked iron screens curved outward to the street, and painted blue or green. It was silent: there was no traffic, and the Arabs, who passed each other with nothing but a low-voiced greeting, moved noiselessly. They were treading in another world, a world of leisure, quiet, and melancholy; and there was a curious fragrance, as of spices, in the air—a smell which Riccardo soon learnt to associate with the Medina quarter.

"Here we are," said Ciccio Scarfi, taking a turning out of the Street of the Five Fingers into a wider and sunnier highway. The striped archway and steps of an ancient mosque faced them, and on the wall near it a notice in French and Italian had been affixed: "Those not of the Mussulman Faith are forbidden entrance." Crooked streets, lined with booths, ran to east and north and south.

Ciccio came to a halt before a big green door, heavily studded with nails like its neighbours, and rapped. It swung back, and an old woman with a kerchief on her head admitted them.

"Ecco, Concetta! Here's the signorino, all the way from Girgenti!"

Concetta dropped a trembling curtsey and wiped her eyes.

"*Santa Maria!* So like his mother that I nursed at this very breast! Excuse me, signori, an old woman can't help crying when she sees a face from years ago. Holy Saints—how like! And fresh from

Girgenti, where I was born, and shall never see again!" She poured a torrent of blessings on him.

Riccardo kissed her on both cheeks, partly to please her and partly to stop her. He had a dread of the old.

"I have practically rebuilt the house," his uncle said, as they crossed the sunlit courtyard, surrounded by stilted arches of the same black-and-white masonry as that of the mosque without. "Arab houses are uncomfortable, and Gioconda had an idea that she would have the place heated throughout in winter like an hotel . . . through here, and up these stairs, Riccardo. For my part a scaldino is enough to keep the house warm when it's cold. Our grandfathers did with them. But women always want to keep up with the times. I like to humour my women-folk, and, happily, I can afford to do so."

It was obviously not money difficulties which had given Ciccio Scarfi the worried, almost hunted, look which Riccardo had remarked.

There was a rustle of skirts as they reached the top of the flight, and Riccardo fancied he saw a vanishing petticoat. Whatever it might have been, he forgot it as a tall girl came forward to give him her hand. She bore herself with a grace which he had not expected in his bourgeois cousins. Her eyes were as blue-grey as his own, and her hair, dark and lustreless, was piled upon a shapely head. He met her clear gaze, and felt a liking towards her. Most Sicilian girls of her age would have shown self-consciousness on meeting a cousin of the opposite sex, but there was no trace of discomposure in her manner.

"This is Gioconda," her father exclaimed, with tender pride. "The mother of the family, aren't you, Gioconda mia?"

The girl smiled seriously. "Are you not very tired? I have prepared coffee for you."

She led the way into the living-room, which, like all the rooms in the house, looked over the courtyard.

"Where's Annunziata?" Ciccio asked irritably.

"I don't know, papa mio. She was shy, I think." Gioconda was pouring out the steaming coffee.

"Shy! I never heard such nonsense." He fidgeted with the spoon of his cup.

"Can't you go and fetch her?" he asked presently. "Tell her to come here at once and welcome her cousin." A muffled sound in the passage interrupted him, and leaving his seat in the act of speaking he ran towards the door.

"Here she is, the little cat, taking a peep at us from the passage!" His irritation disappeared in a flash. "*Caridda!* I'm ashamed of your manners. Have you no words to tell your cousin you are glad to see him?"

She was brought in struggling in her father's embrace, rosy and dishevelled.

"*Papa! Papa mio!*"

Once released, she held out her hand with a laugh.

"Good morning, Cousin Riccardo."

"Good morning, Cousin Annunziata."

"Why did you hide?" demanded her father.

"I didn't. I wanted to see him first."

"Why, in the name of the Madonna?"

"Because it's unlucky for him to meet three women one after another when he comes into the house."

"Rubbish!" ejaculated her father. "You are not a woman yet, *caridda*."

"But it is all right now," she explained, settling herself at her father's side, "because he has drunk

some coffee. When one has swallowed something it doesn't count."

"I am obliged to you for your care of my luck," said Riccardo.

"Then, of course, I have become a little tired of hearing about you," she added maliciously. "It has been 'When Cousin Riccardo comes,' and 'You will be nice to Cousin Riccardo,' all day long."

"Hush, Annunziata," said Gioconda with gentle distress.

The spoilt girl went off into a fit of laughter at her father's embarrassed face. "Papa mio! How cross you look."

"There never was such a naughty baby as this," he explained to Riccardo, as he caressed the shining head nestling against his arm. For her hair was golden, almost reddish, and her eyes as green as trout-pools. She was certainly the prettier of the two, but lacked her sister's dignity.

"If papa were an Arab, he'd lock me up," the girl remarked to Riccardo.

"And a very wholesome thing for you too, *caridda*," her father rejoined, using the soft, Sicilian pet name.

CHAPTER II

RICCARDO found a great deal over which to ponder in the household of which he had become a member. There was something about Ciccio Scarfi that gave him the impression that the man was ill at ease. There was a furtive look in his eyes which was unnatural in a successful man.

That he was a devoted father was evident, and again Riccardo puzzled as to why he, a penniless young lawyer, should have been brought into contact with these two girls, who presumably should make rich marriages, unless, for some occult reason, his uncle intended a match between one of them and himself. Sicilian girls are usually guarded as if they were nuns in a convent until their wedding-day; and that he, a first cousin, should have been pitchforked into the family, and allowed free intercourse with girls of seventeen and fifteen, seemed to him revolutionary.

After the midday meal on the day of his arrival, Annunziata waited for him in the passage as he came out of the living-room.

"Would you like to see my pets?" she asked him.

He assented willingly, and she sprang down the marble steps before him; crossed the sunny courtyard with the young man at her heels, and entered through a second archway a second *patio*, smaller than the first, and overgrown with grass. A huge wooden tub, in

which a magnolia was growing, stood in one corner. The pavement was hot underfoot, and the magnolia filled the court with its oppressive perfume. A disused fountain was in the middle, and a portion of the colonnade was screened off with wood and matting. It was towards this that Annunziata ran.

He followed her and looked over the barrier. It concealed a rough tank, fed apparently from the fountain; and in the water, in the one patch of sun which reached them, stood three pink-and-white flamingoes, their tall, spindle legs drawn up, their expressions contemplative and resigned.

"This," she said mysteriously to Riccardo, "is my harem." She pulled back the matting, and the three birds emerged with ludicrous, thin-legged dignity.

"Aren't they charming?" she asked. "And they are so sensible. You wouldn't think it possible for birds to have so much brains."

She looked so serious and charming herself as she made the remark that Riccardo smiled.

"Aren't you afraid that your harem will fly away?" he asked, remembering the strong beat of wings as the flamingoes had flown over the ship that morning.

"Oh, but they can't. That's why I call them my harem. You see I have tied their wings. This one with the extra long neck is Fatima, and this one is Douja, and the smallest and prettiest is Yasoda. Aren't they pretty, the darlings? When they die, and I am old, I shall have them stuffed like the flamingoes in the Rue Djazira. Aren't they *coquettes*? They are so proud of their long necks."

She imitated their curvings and movements with her own pretty neck, while he laughed, and, picking up a fallen magnolia petal, thick and fragrant, aimed it at

the innocent Fatima. It hit her under the wing, and thus startled, she made an impotent attempt to fly.

Annunziata burst into a peal of laughter.

Riccardo exclaimed, "Poor bird!"

"Poor bird! I should call it a very lucky bird."

"It seems cruel . . ."

She flushed quickly. "Cruel! How dare you say so."

"I only mean that it seems hard to keep them penned up here. I saw a flock of them this morning, winging their way across the gulf towards the sun, as free as eagles, as if the sea and air were all theirs."

She listened, a little mollified.

"But mine have such a good time," she said. "They have fish to eat without the bother of finding and fighting for it, and they are petted every day, and when it is winter they live in the house. Fatima just adores me; she would be unhappy if I were to untie her wings. Wouldn't you, Fatima darling? And Douja is so greedy that she would never get enough to eat if she were free; would you, my dearest? And, as for Yasoda, she would get pecked to death; wouldn't you, my own?"

The birds allowed her to fondle them, and she glanced at him defiantly.

"I daresay I'm wrong," he admitted, looking at his cousin. "If one is in prison, it depends upon the gaoler as to whether fetters are pleasant or not."

She came up to him. "Do you know, Riccardo, that from one corner of the roof I can see a real harem. You see, my room is in what used to be the women's part of this house, and the roof used to connect with the women's apartments, so that they could visit their neighbours by walking over the roof-

tops. But now the owner of the house next-door has built a wall round his roof and pulled down the connecting bit, so that we can't see anything. But there is one place in the wall which is a little lower, and when I get out of my window and climb round by the parapet which joins the houses, I can see over."

"To whom does the house belong?"

"I have often asked the Arabs round here, and Achmed, but no one seems to know. There is a little mystery about it. Only closed carriages drive to the door, like harem carriages, with red blinds drawn down. It must be a rich man, because the horses are nice ones. The Arab ladies often come and sit on the roof; and sometimes he comes too, with a younger man, perhaps his son. One lady saw me peeping one day, and laughed and spoke to me—said '*Bonjour*.' She was unveiled, and not very young, but quite pretty. She held up the book that she was reading, and I saw that it was a French novel. So I threw her a rose that I was wearing, and she smiled and smelt at it. I've never told any of the others, especially Salvatore, who would be certain to go and look, and there would be a dreadful fuss—he might be killed perhaps."

"What, only for a look!"

"Why not!" She shook her young head sagely. "Oh, you haven't lived here since your babyhood like I have. Tunis isn't civilised like Algiers."

"Can you walk on your roof?"

"Why, of course! All the washing is dried out there! And in the hot weather we bring our beds up there and sleep. We dance there sometimes. There's nothing like a tarantella by moonlight, and Concetta

has taught us all the steps. You shall dance it with us. And Gioconda and I often creep out when papa is asleep and tell each other stories on the roof."

"What sort of stories?"

"I don't think I can tell you."

"Why not?"

"They are just girls' stories you see."

"Then I should like to hear what they are."

"They are nothing, really, and mine are very stupid. You see, I make up a story in which Gioconda meets the man she is going to marry, and all the adventures they are to have together; and she makes up one about the man I am to marry. But hers are always best."

"And what sort of a man are you going to marry?"

"I get a fresh one every time. Two nights ago, I was married to—whom do you think?"

"How should I guess?"

"Well—" she bubbled with laughter,—“To the Bey."

"What is he like?" Riccardo asked, a little sourly.

"Oh, he is very plain—a yellow-haired man with a pasty face. Only Gioconda made him good-looking, and that made it all right. One night she told me a story that lasted till three o'clock, when it began to get light; and she was quite angry when she found out the time."

"What, with you?"

"She's never angry with me. No, with herself. Because she had forgotten that it was bedtime and had kept me up."

"And what kind of a lover do you give her?"

She laughed. "Oh, I shan't tell you any more. Oh, *santo Dio*! I forgot; it is past two o'clock, and I promised to get ready and go shopping with Gioconda!"

"Annunzi—a—ta!" rang a distant voice.

Annunziata looked conscience-stricken. "I shan't be ready for a long time yet. I must go." And she darted through to the outer patio. She had forgotten the flamingoes, who made to follow her. Riccardo shooed them away from the horseshoe doorway, and penned them into their tank again.

Salvatore, who did not appear until the dinner-hour, proved the least interesting of his new relations. His face was flabby and dissipated-looking; he looked more than his nineteen years. He was evidently something of a thorn in the family flesh, and seemed to have a very desultory interest in his father's affairs. It was plain that there was not much love lost between father and son.

"How do you like Tunis?" he asked, when his father had left the house and the two girls had withdrawn to their own rooms. Then, without waiting for a reply, he continued, "It is rotten living in the Arab quarter. It is part of my father's stinginess. He is quite rich enough to take a fine house in the European quarter."

"Personally, I should prefer this house. I find it delightful," Riccardo observed, as he watched the cloud of tobacco smoke which his cousin was bringing through his nostrils.

"Delightful, do you! Ah, that's because you're new to it, and think the Arabs picturesque, and all that. Wait till you've lived here a year, and you'll hate 'em

worse than I do. Not but what I'd sooner have an Arab than a Jew." He yawned discontentedly. "Give me the European quarter, and a house not far from the Casino."

"There is a Casino here?"

"First-class. We might go there to-night, if you like, and trot round afterwards to have dinner with the little *comédienne* who has the fifth and seventh turns. She's a nice little girl. By the way, have you a latch-key? No? Well, you'd better get one to-morrow." He yawned again.

"I should rather like to see some of the native dances," Riccardo said. "I met a man on the boat who gave me the address of a place where one could see a dancer."

"I could give you any number. The *danse du zentie* is an uninteresting spectacle—merely a lot of fat woman convulsing themselves, and Jewesses at that. Sort of thing tourists go to see."

"He said that this was a special dancer—one that Europeans could not often see."

"Oh, I've heard that tale many times. He was probably an agent. Let me see the address"

Riccardo searched in his pocket, and produced the card.

Salvatore examined both sides of the card. "Conradin—who's that? Rue du Caire's a good address. Ali Habib, Rue des Montagnes. That isn't one of the ordinary lot anyway. I suppose it isn't the dancer——?" He broke off, and looked at the card with faint interest.

"Isn't what?"

"The Commissioner of the Police got drunk on absinthe one night, and talked of a dancer he had seen

in that street. He said he went there with an Arab lawyer, and that the woman was covered with jewels. We thought it was absinthe, but it might have been true. Anyway, I'll take you there to-night if you like, out of mere curiosity."

Riccardo did not feel enthusiastic at his cousin's offer, but he had no wish to make himself disagreeable.

He went to his room. Gioconda had set a jar full of frisas on the sill. Their odour greeted him as he entered the room, and he noticed that she had lit a nightlight below the ivory figure of Christ that hung transfixed on an old tortoiseshell cross. He went to the window. The moonlight fell on the patio below, casting purple shadows beneath the black-and-white columns. He could see a vision of flat, uneven roofs, blanched and unpeopled, beyond it. The glamour of the place seized him, and his youth sang in his veins. He wondered what the dancing woman he was to see would be like. As he left the door, more by habit than through belief or reverence, he stooped to kiss the ivory feet of the figure on the crucifix. But as he kissed them, he thought of the soft feet of women.

CHAPTER III

HE found Salvatore waiting for him below. His cousin cultivated the appearance of a Frenchman, and not unsuccessfully. He looked like a vulgar boulevardier.

It was warm, but not sultry; the late April air had still the flower-freshness of spring. They went past the Hamman, gay in the daytime in the parroquet bravery of red, blue, and green; past the street of the booksellers, where during the sunny hours there is a gentle silence and the musty perfume of ancient books and illuminated Korans. Now it was deserted, and lit only by a solitary oil-lamp. But the moon drowned the light of the little yellow flame, and made the white-washed walls almost azure.

Their next turning brought them to the steps of one of the eight entrances of the Great Mosque. Again Riccardo was confronted by the sign, "Those not of the Mussulman Faith are forbidden to enter." The street facing it was one of those hybrid byways in which two civilisations met: there were shops on either hand; poor little shops, some European, some Jewish, some Arab; and a buzz of life beneath the gas-lamps.

"We are going a long way round," Salvatore was saying; "but I am not going down all the side streets at this time of night. We'll walk down here, and get into the Street of the Kasbah by way of the Porte de France. The Kasbah used to be a rascally street years

ago, but it's as safe as the Avenue de France now. Some eighteen years back a murder was committed there which caused a considerable amount of talk between the Italian Consulate and the French. It has been well policed ever since that fuss."

"What murder?"

"It was at an inn, the Del Sole, which was only pulled down a short while ago. An officer, a Frenchman, was robbed and stabbed there; and the proprietress, a Sicilian, declared two Arab women had done it. As a matter of fact it was thought that they had only been her accomplices. In any case, it was never satisfactorily cleared up, and the Arab women were never found."

"Women?" repeated Riccardo.

"Yes. I suppose they were dancers or prostitutes—I forget the details. I know about it, because this Commissioner I mentioned to you was mixed up in it."

"You mean the man who told you about the Rue des Montagnes?"

"Yes, that's the man."

"Did the Sicilian get off?"

"I forget. The whole thing was a muddle, but there was a sensation about it at the time, because of the quarrel between the Consulate and the Résidence. My father remembers it, but I was only a *bambino* at the time."

They had turned into the Rue de la Kasba. It was noisy; unveiled Jewesses, unwieldy of shape and coarse of feature, were haggling over meat at a Jewish butcher's, and some Sicilians were quarrelling in loud, angry voices. A young Jewess, with red cheeks and large hips, leered into Riccardo's face as she passed, and made him a signal.

But soon they branched off into another moon-blanced, silent street, with nothing but an occasional door to show that human beings had their habitations behind the high walls. It was as if a living thing were scaled over by stone: as if living eyes were imprisoned behind the smooth orbs of a sphinx. They turned again into a street that was a replica of the one they left, except that it twisted tortuously.

"Here is the number," said Salvatore, stopping before a door. On the whitewashed wall beside it there was the imprint of a hand.

"Why, look—!" Riccardo exclaimed in sudden horror. "The print of a hand—in blood!"

Salvatore laughed. "Blood, of course it's blood—bullock's blood! That's the hand of Fatma—a sign to bring good luck. You'll see it on almost every house in Tunis. It averts the—you know what."

He crossed himself, and, although he smiled, Riccardo did the same. Like his cousin, he had no desire to court misfortune by mentioning the Evil Eye. His scepticism did not forbid being on the safe side in such matters.

Salvatore knocked at the door several times. It was pushed a little open, and the face of a negro appeared, or rather his gleaming eyes and teeth, which were the only features distinguishable in the obscurity of the doorway. Salvatore uttered some words in Arabic. The negro replied.

Salvatore turned to Riccardo.

"He says there is a mistake, that no dancing-house is here."

"Show him the card," Riccardo said, producing it.

The negro took the piece of pasteboard into his hand, and closed the door upon them.

The two young men looked blankly at each other, but almost immediately the door opened again. The negro had lit a taper, and smiled at them benignly.

"He says it's all right," Salvatore said briefly, and they stepped over the threshold.

They found themselves admitted into a small, covered, and apparently disused patio. A worn path crossed the centre. The roof was a makeshift of rough skins stretched upon bamboos, and gouts of moonlight fell here and there upon the paving. Wherever paving stones had been torn up pallid grass was growing: the whole place wore a mournful air, and seemed the last place in which to expect an entertainment. But a droning music and the thrup-thrup of Oriental drums met their ears as they followed their guide. He pushed open another door, and went before them into a second and larger patio, surrounded by an arcading of black-and-white stone.

Half the courtyard was in moonlight, the second half, from which the sky was excluded by a heavy sacking awning, was lit by an acetylene flare, and two sputtering torches thrust into sockets on the wall. The light thus afforded was fitful. A group of musicians squatted in one corner, and a row of five or six women sat in a semicircle beside them, spangled and bejewelled and voluminously trousered. It was from these that the chanting had proceeded. Facing them, on a large piece of matting spread for that purpose, with their backs to the moonlight, were the audience, huddled into their burnouses, or enveloped in thick cloaks. The singers, alone of all the company, sat on chairs.

"La-ih-ihlya," they droned, while the musicians, who sat beside them, swayed to the music they made.

The women were stolid, not a muscle in their heavy faces moving. The note scarcely varied. What were they uttering, of what primeval music of sea and reed was this song born?

One or another of them smiled and made some motion of the head between the phrases, in a languid manner, as if in response to a friend in the audience, but otherwise the fleshy faces were expressionless. Riccardo looked, with disappointment, at their swollen bodies, their thick, white-stockinged ankles, their mountainous breasts and unwieldy hips. Even their dress was devoid of taste. The colours were too garish, the display of their charms too generous.

"I wonder how much we shall have to pay for this," Salvatore said a trifle uneasily, as they sat on the chairs which had been placed for them behind the rows of intent Arabs.

The negro who had brought them in, hurried up with two cups of thick coffee on a tray, and Salvatore asked him a question in Arabic, but only elicited a grunt. In a moment, however, he returned with a tall, white-turbaned Arab, a handsome man of about fifty, with a clear, fair complexion. A second colloquy took place, and at its close the tall man touched his forehead, mouth and breast, and withdrew.

"I have spoken to the proprietor," Salvatore said, puzzled. "And he says that as friends of Monsieur Conradin's he cannot allow us to pay, that we must be his guests. Who in the devil is this Conradin?"

"I don't know," Riccardo returned. "But I'm going to see him soon."

"He must know his way about," said Salvatore, lighting a cigarette. He offered his cousin one, but Riccardo refused. Most of the Arabs were smoking

Seeing Riccardo decline the cigarette, one of them, sitting by their feet, courteously lifted his pipe from his lips, refilled and relit it, and handed it to the young Sicilian. Riccardo was on the point of refusing, but Salvatore made a sign that he had better not. So Riccardo accepted with an inclination of the head, and examined the pipe as he inhaled the smoke. It had a long, slender wooden stem, and the earthenware bowl was hardly bigger than an acorn. He drew at it for some minutes and found it agreeable. The Arab watched him, smiling, and when the small bowl was burnt out refilled it for him, drawing another for himself out of the hood of his burnous and waving aside Riccardo's offer to return the little pipe. He put his leathern pouch between them, and motioned that Riccardo was to refill it whenever he chose.

The flavour was herbal and fragrant. He watched the thin mist of smoke, saw it disappear, and yet was aware that it had not melted, that it remained like a clear film between himself and the musicians and women. His senses seemed soothed, his limbs possessed of a delicious languor. It was possible that there was a little opium mixed with the leaf. The film left by the smoke became gradually thicker, until it appeared to him like a fine, very transparent veil, which did not blur any detail of what he saw. On the contrary, the minutest things became startlingly clear.

The nasal chant and drub-drubbing went on monotonously. It seemed as if it would never cease. "La-ih-ih-ihlya!" The smoke-veil began to cast a glamour over the coarse and expressionless figures. He began to find something tragic in the blankness of their eyes, in the shapelessness of their faces. "La-ih-ih-ihlya!"

And the Arabs smoked on, gazed on, seriously and sadly. Many of them smelt at the roses or carnations which were stuck behind their ears; or sipped at their black coffee; but their attentive, gentle faces never smiled, never betrayed a trace of impatience.

"La-ih-ih-ihlya."

"Well, what do you think of your beauties?" Salvatore asked in a low voice. "Jewesses, of course. Arab women don't dance here as a rule."

"But when does the dancing begin?" Riccardo was surprised to find that he spoke distinctly, for his voice sounded far-off, and as if some one else had used his lips. He stooped and filled the little pipe again, pleased with the fantastic feeling which it produced.

"In a minute I expect. Look at that girl over there. I don't expect she's over twenty, though she's the fattest of the lot. Like a white elephant, eh? Shouldn't care to have to marry her. Look at her steeple hat in gold—*cufia* they call it. Awfully proud of that. Fancy dressing in magenta pink and sky blue! They're much about the same lot of fat Jewesses that you'd find in any café in the Bab Souika. I don't see where that dancer's going to come from."

The chant had suddenly ceased, and a white-clad boy refilled their cups.

Riccardo laid down his pipe, and sipped at the coffee.

"What's wrong with that stuff I have been smoking?" he asked Salvatore. His cousin gave a careless glance. "Why, nothing—it's kif, a mild edition of hashish. Hashish is too dear for most Arabs—the prohibition makes it expensive."

The musicians began again. Riccardo examined their instruments more closely. They were as mysterious as their music, with its pulse of drums. There was

a one-stringed instrument made of a tortoiseshell, a bamboo flute, a pair of drums that were nothing but jars of glazed pottery, one blue the other green, with the skin of an animal stretched and laced across the bottom.

At last there was a movement among the women, and one stood up, smiling. It was the young Jewess whom Salvatore named the "white elephant." There was a certain coarse handsomeness about her. Her eyes were large and artificially bright; her heavy features were good. Her brows were joined by a line of some pigment—henna perhaps. How could she dance, impeded by that superfluous flesh on hips and arms and body? But it could hardly be called dancing, for she did not move off the foot of ground upon which she stood. Riccardo repressed an exclamation.

It was this very superfluous flesh that was dancing, not the woman herself. The slow flesh of her abdomen, hips, and breasts heaved and moved like the waves of the sea. It jerked, rose, fell, and twisted. From time to time she turned her back to the audience to reverse the performance, or leant back to display her bare breasts.

Salvatore gaped. "Tame, isn't it? Yet Arabs come night after night to stare at this sort of thing. If that precious dancer doesn't turn up soon, we'll quit and get off to the Casino. . . . I'll go and ask old what's-his-name, the proprietor."

He got up and went towards Ali Habib, who was standing at a little distance behind them. Habib's patriarchal courtesy of manner, Riccardo thought, scarcely concealed his slight air of condescension, as he listened to what Salvatore had to say. He made a sign

to one of the musicians: there was a colloquy, and goings and comings. The young Arab made signs to Riccardo that he should refill his pipe, and Riccardo did so, for the kif had already lost its effect. He inhaled the smoke with relish. The red atom of ash at the end of the long stem glowed at him like a friendly eye.

Presently Salvatore rejoined him.

"There is a special dancer," he said. "They have sent for her now."

The fat Jewess sat down, panting, and the musicians began a lighter, wilder measure. The pulse of the drums leapt and throbbed. The smoke-veil again formed between Riccardo and what he saw, although his brain was active. He felt as if he could not stir, as if his nerves and muscles were asleep.

"*Ecco!*" cried Salvatore in an excited voice.

Before the semicircle formed by the Jewish houris the figure of a woman stepped into the flare of the torches, enveloped from head to foot in a silken veil of a dull scarlet colour. She moved slowly into the centre, and then, with a swift movement, drew the folds of the veil together so tightly about her that every contour of her shapely body was apparent. It was skilfully done, and there was a murmur of applause.

The faces of the Arabs were alight for the first time. They leant forward with parted lips, smiling at the scarlet figure, and uttering eager exclamations.

"The proprietor says she dances for the Bey," Salvatore remarked, "and that in Constantinople she was given an emerald by the Sultan. He told me she had danced all over the world, and that she is charmed. He said the Arabs thought it lucky to see her. . . . I wish she'd move. She looks like a corpse."

They waited, anticipating a sign of life, straining their eyes for a movement.

At last! The shrouded figure before them seemed to quiver. It stirred, bent and swayed, slowly at first, as grass is stirred by the first breath of day. It was as though a mummy were gradually flushing with life. The dull crimson of the material actually seemed to change colour, and to become more vivid.

Riccardo gazed at her, fascinated. She was not dancing in the European sense, yet every posture and gesture of her lithe body appeared as full of energy as the wildest tarantella. The music grew louder. Her scarlet draperies flickered like flames, wavered. They seemed to grow transparent and opaque by turns.

The dance of the flesh began once more; only, this time, it was no inert, jerking mass, but a human body conscious of every muscle, of every passion. Riccardo was reminded of the slow-shuddering ripple that passes up a snake's body as it moves itself along. He had never seen vitality personified as this woman personified it. Then there was a gleam—the tightened material had parted. It closed. Again it opened, again it closed. The opening and closing reminded him of an opening and shutting mouth, of leaves blown together in a wind, of he knew not what. The Arabs craned forward. The veil was parting again, falling; she stood half-naked before them, bare from her hips to her chin. He noted with unnatural minuteness a blue vein on one breast, and the white glitter of diamonds in the broad necklace that encircled her throat.

Yet her head, thrown back from her shoulders, was still shrouded.

The drums beat furiously, the chant of the singers seemed an imprecation, a supplication. The dance of

the flesh went on. Was it a serpent, or a woman, or both? She had been wise to cover her face. Was she in agony? Her body swayed, twisted, shuddered, as though fire were leaping through her. Her arms, laden with bracelets, moved continuously, the fingers fluttering in a dance of their own.

Riccardo could bear no more. He did not know whether it was his own blood or the thrup-thrumping of the drums which beat in his veins.

"Mabrouka! Mabrouka!" The voices were hoarse—there was a frenzy abroad. Riccardo saw the Arab in front of him lean forward like one possessed, and fling something at the dancer which glittered in the air. Somehow the veil of smoke became denser, it joined mysteriously into the crimson draperies of the dancer, grew dense, clung to him, muffled him, choked him. His senses swam; the music had ceased. He opened his eyes after a great while, confused.

"Do you feel better?" asked Salvatore with concern.
"That kif must have been too much for you."

CHAPTER IV

THE next morning was Sunday. Long before Riccardo was up, Gioconda had done her day's marketing and had dressed for Mass. By the time he was drinking his coffee in the morning-room, she came in, fresh and cool in a grey muslin dress. He looked at her approvingly. In Sicily few women except the rich aristocracy have either taste or money enough to dress well.

"Are you going out again?" he inquired.

"To Mass," she said. "Didn't you know it was Sunday?"

"I did not know that it was so late. May I come too?"

"Of course," she replied.

"Is Annunziata going?"

"She always takes a long time to dress."

Riccardo waited below in the patio while Gioconda went to help her sister. He had been brought up in the secular, free-thinking way characteristic of modern Italy, and seldom went to Mass, far less often to confession.

"We usually attend the Santa Croce," Gioconda said when the two sisters had rejoined him. "But if you like we will go to the Cathedral this morning. The music is good there, and Father Verrier, one of the *Pères Blancs*, is preaching a mission sermon."

"Whichever you like," Riccardo replied. His head was still heavy, and his limbs possessed by a kind of

languor. He had had strange dreams: in which he was following the dancing-woman through countless doors in an attempt to reach her and pull her draperies from her. But she evaded him, and her head was always shrouded. Whenever he came near touching her, her silken shawls floated out to him and smothered his mouth so that he could not cry out. The throbbing of the drums had pursued him intermittently; and the fat dancer, with her foolish smile.

"Why not wait to take him to the Cathedral till next Sunday," Annunziata suggested. "It is Palm Sunday, and the Cardinal will celebrate at High Mass. Père Verrier always makes one want to go to sleep, and Riccardo looks sleepy enough as it is."

"Yes, you look tired," Gioconda added to him. "There are rings under your eyes."

He protested that he felt full of energy, and they started.

Annunziata chattered unceasingly. Riccardo was amused by her gaiety and naiveté, and thought that she looked radiantly pretty. She was nothing more than a buoyant child, for all her fifteen birthdays, while Gioconda seemed older than her years. They walked down into the Rue de l'Eglise, through which Riccardo had passed the night before. It was gay with the light robes of the Arabs, and noisy with the cries of hawkers of all nations. The very sunlight was blithe, the air danced with it.

The Santa Croce stood between an Arab carpet shop and a Jewish brass shop—a dark little church, none too clean, and tawdry enough. Coming in from the bright daylight of the street, the gloom, and the twinkling of the candles before the altars, gave Riccardo the feeling that he had passed abruptly into the lower world, from

the spring sunlight of Enna into the melancholy domain of Pluto. A transparent curtain hung before the high altar, with a representation of the Crucifixion outlined upon it. The air was heavy with incense: he could distinguish the kerchiefed heads of women kneeling in a side chapel in which a priest was hurrying through a Mass.

The two girls moved reverently before him. As they passed one of the side altars, Gioconda paused, and, taking a candle, lighted it and placed it beside others on the stand. She rejoined them in a moment, but Riccardo observed, as he looked back, that the altar was that of Our Lady of the Seven Dolours, and wondered. Was it possible that so young a girl could have a cause to plead before the Mother of Sorrows? He looked at her face during the celebration of the Mass, but read nothing there except composure and devotion.

Salvatore made a tardy appearance at the noonday meal, and he was not very talkative. Ciccio Scarfi was moody also.

Riccardo, on the contrary, had lost his headache, and though he still had a disinclination for food, he forced himself to eat in order to please Gioconda, who was concerned with the fear that he did not care for the modest dishes she had provided.

Ciccio Scarfi drank plentifully of the white Carthaginian wine that stood beside him, without adding water to it in the abstemious Sicilian fashion, and when the meal was over took a Cognac with his coffee. Riccardo looked up several times to meet his eyes, which were immediately and furtively withdrawn.

"What are you going to do this afternoon, my little soul?" he asked of his youngest daughter.

"Grazia de Angelis has asked me to go with her to the Kram, papa mio. It is her name-day, and they are having a *festa*."

"How often have I told you not to have anything to do with the Sicilians here, unless I bring them to the house," Ciccio burst out irritably.

"But Grazia was at school with Annunziata," intervened Gioconda gently.

"Who is this De Angelis? I never heard of him," her father growled.

"He is dead; there is only the Signora, and a brother who is in the Banque de Tunisie."

"Well, well; I daresay there's no harm this time . . . but there are a lot of Sicilians here that can be of no use to either of you. I'm not going against our people, for I've good Sicilian friends here, as you all know. But there is such a thing as being careful."

Salvatore raised his eyebrows, Gioconda looked troubled, and Annunziata repressed a giggle.

"Besides, Annunziata, I wanted you to entertain your cousin to-day," Ciccio Scarfi went on. "He will have to start into work to-morrow, and will have no time to go gadding about."

"But, papa mio," Annunziata said coaxingly, "Grazia would be disappointed if I didn't come, and she has arranged it weeks and weeks ago."

"I don't need entertainment," Riccardo put in, with a laugh.

"There, you see, papa mio!" Annunziata exclaimed, putting her arm around her father's neck. "And I heard Gioconda and Riccardo say they were going out, too."

"You know you can get round your father, *caridda*," Ciccio said, with a sigh. "Well, go and enjoy thyself,

little heart; and do not eat too many of the sweet things."

He pushed back his chair and left the room, first kissing his two daughters.

"I cannot understand what has come over papa lately," Annunziata observed, with a sigh, balancing herself perilously on the arm of her brother's chair. "What with papa being cross, and Salvatore being odious, one might as well have no relations."

"Thanks," Salvatore returned, drinking his Cognac. "It's lucky other men's sisters don't think the same. Look out, you'll upset me!"

"Don't omit me," Riccardo said.

"Among the relations? Of course not. You have been amiable so far; hasn't he, *carina*?" She threw the end of her sentence to her sister.

"Are you really going out with Gioconda this afternoon?" Salvatore asked. "I could take you——"

"If she will permit me?" Riccardo looked towards his eldest cousin.

"I should like to have your company," she returned, with a slight flush. "But I shall not be able to go just yet; I have several things to do about the house."

"Come to my room for a smoke," Salvatore said, rising. "We can talk until Gioconda is ready."

Salvatore's bedroom was characteristic of its owner. It was filled with stale smoke, and almost papered on one side of the wall with photographs of vaudeville actresses of the lowest type, and cuttings from the French comic papers.

"How do you feel?" his cousin asked. "You did for yourself last night; it must have been hashish that you were smoking. If you're not accustomed to it, hashish is about as strong as raw spirit—I've seen

people go mad on it. You were like a drunken man when I got you outside. . . . That wasn't a bad dancer—that Mabrouka. Something odd about it, that made you feel creepy. . . . But I hate these native dances, however good they are—give me a good ballet any day. Did you see the dance, or were you too far gone?"

"Yes, I saw her dance."

"Did you know that when I was trying to shake you back into sense she came to you, and talked to me?"

"Did she?"

"Yes; asked a lot of questions, like a silly child. She can talk French too. I wonder why she keeps her face covered. She is not a very young woman, one can see that; it's probable that she is an ugly woman too. Who ever heard of a dancer hiding her face! She's a fine creature, and she had some precious stones about her that I shouldn't mind possessing myself. While we were talking, and you were grunting like a pig, I saw an emerald the size of a small nut in one of her bracelets. . . . She's not a Tunisian—her Arabic isn't guttural enough. Perhaps she is an Egyptian, or a Levantine. . . . The Commissioner told me she was rich—I suppose she has a rich lover somewhere or other."

Gioconda offered to take her cousin into the souks—the honeycomb of shops that lies in the heart of the quarter of Medina. Riccardo was glad to have the opportunity of talking to his silent cousin. There was something about this reserved girl which he was unable to understand. It was not that she met him with a calm friendliness to which he was not

accustomed. For young girls were so scrupulously chaperoned in his own country that except on rare occasions he had never met a young unmarried woman except in the presence of her parents or brothers; and even then the slightest attention shown by him would be liable to be construed matrimonially, both by the girl and her relations. At a ball it was not etiquette to talk much to a partner until she had been safely returned to her chaperone at the end of each dance. The result was surreptitious sentimentality on the part of the girls, and Riccardo had more than once received love-letters from susceptible maidens whose mothers imagined them as innocent as the *petites oies blanches* of tradition. Naturally, young men found themselves obliged, if they needed woman's companionship, to be dependent on the tender mercies of their friends' wives or on those of *cocottes*; and it was new to Riccardo to be conversing with an unmarried woman on equal terms. But an expression of seriousness and thought that crossed her face from time to time, when she was not on her guard, aroused his curiosity, and awakened, he knew not why, an instinct of chivalry.

At the top of the Rue de l'Eglise, by the vaulting which helps to exclude the light from the Bey's prisons, Gioconda paused.

"Would you mind if we went in here for a moment?" she asked. "I never pass without giving the poor creatures something."

"What poor creatures?" he asked.

"The prisoners." She drew out her purse, and stopped before an old negress who sat by one of the painted columns with a large basketful of flat loaves beside her. Gioconda selected two, and paid for them; then, with a word of greeting to the two untidy-looking

sentinels who were conversing with each other outside the prison door, she entered the gloomy place.

In a large cell, just within the door, lower by some three feet than the level of the street, and shut off by iron bars, a number of Arabs were herded together. They were of the lowest type, miserable creatures, dressed for the most part in rough garments of sack-cloth and camel's-hair. Some were chattering, some laughing, some playing cards. Others sat in silence on the earthen floor, their knees drawn up to their chins, their eyes fixed upon the opposite wall. As soon as the foreigners were perceived there was a general rush to the bars, and some ten or eleven hands were thrust through the bars, while a chorus of pleading voices deafened them. Hungry faces, wolfish and grotesque as those of satyrs, were close against the iron grating.

"You don't mean that all these creatures are dependent upon chance charity for their food?" Riccardo asked.

"Practically. Their relations feed them as a rule."

"And if they have no relations?"

"God pity them, poor things! But Mahommedans are charitable, and I do not think they would starve."

She was rapidly breaking the loaves into small pieces as she spoke, and placed the morsels in the eager hands outstretched for them.

Many of the prisoners remained huddled up on the ground; they were either too apathetic or too indifferent to move. Presently there was a loud yell: a fragment had fallen on to the floor, and three of the Arabs were fighting wildly for it, their faces demoniacal with greed.

Gioconda looked at him, her eyes swimming with tears.

"I can't bear this place," she said.

Riccardo felt that he could not. He emptied his

pockets of the change which he found there, and flung it on to the earthen floor, then followed his cousin to the door, reluctant to watch the beast-like scramble for the coins.

But she hesitated in the doorway.

"We can't get out for a moment; some one is passing," she explained. A carriage was making its way down from the Great Mosque at the top of the street, accompanied by a crowd of Arabs who filled the narrow street.

"It must be the Bey," Gioconda observed. "Take a good look at him, Riccardo!"

The carriage advanced slowly towards them, the Arabs beside it elbowing a way for themselves.

Riccardo looked. In the carriage sat an elderly man in Arab dress, a white turban embroidered with gold upon his head, and a burnous of grey cashmere about his shoulders. A negro in livery sat upon the box.

The Sicilian gave a start. Surely he was not mistaken. The light blue eyes upon his own were those of his steamer acquaintance, Conradin.

Instinctively he took off his hat, prepared to smile, but the light blue eyes met his coldly, and with a touch of insolence.

"Why, it isn't the Bey, after all," Gioconda said, turning to him. "But it is some one who is more of a personage still. . . . Why, you took off your hat—you can't know him!"

"I could swear that is the man I met on the boat, coming over. If he isn't civil enough to recognise me, I don't care a centesimo who he is."

"Oh, but you must be mistaken!" she objected with a laugh. "That is Si Ismael—Si Ismael ben Aloui,

and he only travels in his own yacht. He is immensely rich. Perhaps your friend was like him."

"What is he then?"

"No one knows exactly. He is a hereditary saint, I believe, somewhere down in the Algerian Sahara, but he lives here a great deal, and the French Government is very polite to him. They say he is half English, or something of that sort. He is the Bey's friend. No one knows how he gets his money, either—the Bey is much too poor to give him any, he can hardly live on what the French allow him, papa says."

"Is he a minister then—part of the Beylical Government?"

"No," Gioconda answered; "he has no office, but people say he has a hand in everything that happens, and that if it weren't for him the Bey would have been deposed long ago. Some people think he is paid by the English Government; others that the German Emperor employs him. But half of it is ignorant talk, you know."

Riccardo was puzzled. He was absolutely certain that he had not been mistaken. He would have recognised the eyes anywhere, in spite of the difference of dress. They were too extraordinary to be duplicated in a stranger. But he said nothing more to Gioconda, and woke from his cogitations to find himself entering the bazaar, past the long colonnade of the Great Mosque.

They were passing into a subdued light. It took him a moment to take in the whole, as a man who wakes in an unfamiliar room. The pictures he had conjured up as a child when he had pored over the adventures of Haroun Al Raschid, recurred to him; but they had not approached the reality. The roofing,

broken here and there, admitted dazzling patches of light; but except for these, and for gaudy green and scarlet columns like parrots in a cloister, everything was golden and low in tone, as if warmed by the sun which could not penetrate. On either side were low shops, and to and fro passed a throng of yellow-slippered Arabs, negroes, Berbers, and Jews. There was a soft babel of voices, a gentle murmur like that around a summer hive. Incurious eyes were turned on the girl and boy as they walked up the white, uneven aisle, invaders from another world.

"This is the Street of the Perfumers," explained Gioconda. "It is the most aristocratic part of the bazaars. The perfumers are Moors of Spanish descent, and they are very proud. They say that some of them still keep the keys of their palaces at Granada and Cordova, but I have never asked them if it is true. Most of them are so rich that they need never make another penny; but they come still, just because their fathers did, I suppose."

The shops were small, and had but a single counter, crowded with bottles of gilt and coloured glass; bunches of tall candles and slender phials of perfume a foot or more long were suspended from above, and jars of essences and oils filled the shelves on either side. Their owners reclined on the seats behind the counters, idly conversing with their friends or customers. They were pale of complexion, and dressed in rich materials of delicate hues, æsthetic vendors of æsthetic wares.

Gioconda paused before one of them. "I will introduce you to this man," she whispered. "Mahommed Enifar is an old friend of papa's."

An elderly Arab behind the counter smiled and saluted them gravely.

"All the friends of mademoiselle are my friends," he said, signing to them to sit down. His manner was that of a prince entertaining honoured guests. He inquired after the health of Ciccio Scarfi; hoped that Riccardo would be favourably impressed with Tunis, and was surprised to hear that he had not yet seen the fine new gardens of the Belvedere. The next moment an attendant, who had obeyed a word from him on their approach, brought them two cups of thick, sweet coffee.

"Mademoiselle, permit me!"

Mahommed Enifar was reaching down one of his slender phials, and pouring out one, two, three precious drops into each cup. Had monsieur come from Sicily? Was he staying long? Had he visited the Casino? He begged that mademoiselle would allow him to perfume her handkerchief. Gioconda laughingly assented, and so did Riccardo. He insisted that they should choose the essence which they preferred: ambergris, jasmine, attar of roses, musk, lentisk, rosemary, geranium, camphorwood, essence of the Bey—all the exquisite category of Oriental perfumes; and, as they sipped their coffee, they smelt at each; the perfumer touching the palms of their hands with the glass stoppers until the air was rioting with strange, heavy scents.

When they had finished their perfumed coffee, Gioconda thanked him, and took ceremonious leave. He uttered a soft sentence in Arabic, but she smilingly shook her head, and passed on.

They wandered up the bazaar past the souk of the tapestry-sellers, with its rich Eastern dyes and its cheap Manchester dyes; past the souk of the cobblers,

gayest of all with its rows of lemon-coloured and scarlet shoes, their useless heels turned inwards to be trodden down; and up the souks of the tailors, where noisy Jews sat cross-legged, like tailors all over the world, sewing gay djebbas and embroidered jackets, and besetting them with importunate voices. They were glad to escape to the quiet souks of the silk-vendors, where exquisite fabrics shimmered in the half-light; to the palatial shops of the carpet-sellers; to the souk of the weavers, busy with their hand-loom, and to the leather-workers, where embroidered saddles and bridles hung, and enormous straw hats to protect the eyes of desert horsemen from the glare of the sun. The craftsmen never lifted their eyes from their work. They admired the leathern bags of red and yellow sewn with red and green silks and silver thread, and the mirror cases which Bedouin women carry on their hearts.

Women there were none, save here and there a marketing Jewess, a broad white pyramid ending in her conical cap, or a poor little bundle of a serving-woman, old and frail, yashmaked in rusty black crape that only left her keen old eyes visible and a patch of her parchment cheeks.

"I am so glad you like it," Gioconda said, with as much naive pleasure as if she had been Annunziata. "You see, we are all accustomed to it, but I always think that it is beautiful in our quarter. . . ." For the moment she had lost her thoughtful look, and her cheeks were flushed with pleasure.

They came homeward past the tall mosque of the Olive Tree. The Arabs were swarming up to evening prayer. They stood to watch them: in the buzz of the bazaar they had not heard the voice of the muezzin

calling all men to prayer and unity from the minaret which is an exotic flower among the rest. But a black procession met the white one—a small cortege of black-veiled, Maltese women of the humblest class, with surpliced children, and in the midst, borne on the shoulders of two men, a small coffin with a poor little wreath of flowers, swaying with each movement of the bearers.

A priest intoned, the candles flickered, some women sobbed. Among the throng of Orientals the little black group appeared out of place, and as dingy as twilight moths among belated butterflies. Down the mosque steps came three young Arabs, fair as Norsemen, roses in their ears, embroidered shoes on their feet; slender and beautiful with the soft grace of wild animals, smiling as they chatted to each other. One of them caught sight of the little procession wending its way past them down the Rue de l'Eglise. As the tiny coffin passed, he impulsively dropped the rose beneath his turban beside the wreath. Then, with a look almost of fear at the proximity of the dead child, he ran after the other two up the bazaar. And the women went sobbing on their way.

East and West, West and East; the death of children and the scent of roses—and yet, the difference!

CHAPTER V

"HERE is a letter for you, Riccardo," cried Annunziata outside her cousin's room, and she slipped it underneath his door.

He sprang out of bed and picked it up.

It bore the Tunisian postmark, and when he had opened it, he read—

"3 RUE DU CAIRE, TUNIS.

"DEAR SIGNOR BASTIAGNINI,—I am hoping that you will be able to dine with me to-night, and so enable me to renew the pleasure of your acquaintance begun on the *Aurore* last week. I dine, without ceremony, at seven, so that it will be easiest for you perhaps to come here directly from your uncle's offices.—*Cordiali saluti*, CHARLES CONRADIN."

"That is the man for whom you mistook Si Ismael," Gioconda observed, when he had handed the note to her at breakfast.

"What is that about Si Ismael?" her father asked, looking up from his perusal of the *Dépêche Tunisiennne*.

"Riccardo met a man like him on board the *Aurore*."

Ciccio returned to his paper with a grunt. She scanned the note again.

"Number 3 Rue du Caire! That is where a Jewish

girl I know lived until a month ago. Her husband wanted to take a larger house and be farther away from the Ghetto—the Hara they call it here. But she has left now for Marseilles. It must have been retaken at once."

Riccardo made no comment. He had the quick Sicilian instinct for mystery. Could Conradin and Si Ismael be identical? Yet, if so, what object could an exalted Tunisian personage have in furthering an acquaintance with a Sicilian emigrant?

"The girl was called Issar," Gioconda continued reflectively. "Poor thing, she was very unhappy. They had lived in the ordinary Jewish way down in the Hara until her father became rich. Then all the girls were sent to a French school and crammed into European clothes. They were clever and worked hard—but the change was too great for them. Issar married a rich Jew—not a love-match, for she didn't know her husband until the engagement was announced. That's the way with lots of the Jews here now—they live two lives and think with two minds—the Eastern and the Western—and it does not make them happy. I used to go to see her, but never got near knowing her really—there was a gulf fixed somehow."

"She never cleaned her nails properly at school," Annunziata added, with an air of conveying much by one fact. "Are you going to-night, Riccardo?"

"Yes, I shall go, I think," he replied.

The Rue du Caire was a quiet street just off the Avenue de la Marine. It bore an air of French prosperity: legal offices and steamship offices occupied some of the first floors of the houses; the rest were

comfortable residences built of good white stone. Number 3 was like its neighbours, with its green jalousies and irreproachable whiteness and its tall electric street-light just outside the door. It bore, like all the French quarter, a self-satisfied air, as much as to call attention to the prosperity which followed the Republic in her civilising march. If the means she had used to take possession were not immaculate, she could at least indicate the outward peace and plenty and cleanliness which followed in her wake. She meant to point to Algiers and Tunis, and say to the world, "Behold how we govern the Orient! It is the mission of France to bring progress into Africa."

The door was opened by a man-servant in sober black, such as Riccardo had seen in big English houses at Palermo. He was conducted upstairs. His host held out his hand with a smile. Riccardo immediately knew that he had not been deceived: that Si Ismael and Conradin were one and the same person. In spite of his European clothes there was something which suggested the Oriental about this odd man, whose manners were English rather than French, and whose quiet eyes, of light blue, met his own with apparent ingenuousness. With Sicilian aptness for intrigue, Riccardo made up his mind to assume ignorance.

His host took him at once into a room which had been intended by the architect for a salon. It was furnished with simplicity. A table, a writing-desk covered with papers and documents, a large bookcase, Arab musical instruments and weapons on the walls seemed to give little clue to the man or his tastes. There were a few pictures, most of them water-colour sketches—the only pieces of bright colour in the room.

Conradin saw that his glance fell on them, and told him that they were by the celebrated Barrés, from whom he had bought them for a trifle when he was a struggling nobody in Paris. Since that time his fame had spread through Europe, and all because the greatest of French actresses had taken a fancy to a poster he designed for her.

Riccardo listened; although he did not understand much about art, Conradin had a way of talking that forced his interest. As he watched him, the Sicilian thought that this man, whether Arab or not, and although past middle-age, might be similarly dangerous to women. He was gifted with magnetism: he had the power of impelling sympathy.

"And how do you find Tunis?" his host asked over the soup.

"I do not find myself in it yet. There are so many Tunises: the Tunis of the French, and of our nation, and of the Jews, and of the Arabs, and each one different."

"Ah—your uncle lives in the Arab quarter, does he not? . . . That is odd, for you Sicilians usually keep together."

"My uncle does not seem to mix very much with the Sicilians here. Besides the quiet of the Medina quarter suits him."

Conradin poured himself out a glass of mineral water, and filled his guest's glass with champagne.

"Quiet is an excellent thing when—one suffers from nerves."

"It is certainly silent enough. It seems like a quarter of the dead at night compared to our noisy Sicilian towns, where we have mandolines and singing and laughter all night long."

Conradin smiled

"You said there were many Tunises," he went on after a slight pause. "But that is not so. Those of other nations are evanescent, temporary; excrescences produced by a time of transition."

"Of transition?" Riccardo repeated

"Certainly. The Tunis of Islam is the real city. Do you know what the Arabs call their city? The Burnous of the Prophet. To a Tunisian that has as great a significance as the name of his mother. When he hears it, he forgets that the French have ever laid a desecrating hand on it."

"But surely progress must have come, sooner or later," Riccardo said. "It was only a question of who should take the lead. Italy made a bid."

"Progress?" Conradin said. "Are you sure? There are two points of view, you know. Westerners invent electric trams and a fine system of drainage and town councils. They study the laws of nature like ants study the patch of ground they live on—laboriously and carefully; without reverence, without imagination. Well, what do they achieve? 'You can get quickly from one place to another,—perform in one day what once took two,' says the Western. The Oriental replies, 'What matter whether to-day or to-morrow? Work is doubled if you can perform twice as much.' Drainage—well, he suffers from an occasional epidemic which wipes out the unfittest, but he has no nerve failures, none of the hypochondriacs or degenerates which result from modern life. Science, which prolongs the life of weaklings better dead, he knows little of. But he is happy. He lives for the essential things—the things that Westerners need too, beneath all their mass of acquired necessities—his food

and his women and his children and his God. His wants are naked and unashamed. He satisfies all his appetites, carnal, mental, and spiritual, with the same temperance and dignity."

"But politically," Riccardo objected. "For centuries Oriental rule has meant despotism."

Conradin laughed. "What of Japan then?"

"Japan is awake."

"The Near East is waking too. Look at Turkey with her Constitution; look at Persia at grips with a young democracy, at Young Egypt on the way to secure her Parliament. But the impulse must come from within—not from without. No nation ever preserved its vitality under the rule of another race."

Riccardo listened. "And what of the Oriental woman, then?" he asked. "Isn't that the last refuge of despotism?"

His host's face darkened for a moment, then, in a smooth tone, he continued—

"Well, what of them? They are happy. Even Western women have instincts not distantly removed from those of the Oriental woman. They live in their hearts for the essentials of life. They make their womanhood mystical, motherhood sacred. It is the husband—the ordinary Frenchman, Italian, or Englishman who vulgarises the needs of his sex and of his soul. He coarsens his sins and dogmatizes his religion. It is the woman who keeps mysticism alive, and to whom the telephone does not matter."

"But these women—mere servants—children in mind—slaves in body?"

"They have those essentials: the love of a man, their lord; the love of the children they bear him, and

the solaces of a religion that has not been destroyed by useless education. If the woman is to be a fighter, education is necessary. If she is not, it is pernicious. Look at these restless Englishwomen, demanding a share in the government, working beyond their strength beside men whom they do not marry. Is that happiness? Is not the peace and affection of our harems better? Look at Turkey, where education has crept in. There are no unhappier women in the world than the present generation of young Turkish women. No, our women are content. We recognise something higher than mental achievement. Ask any Arab boy if he despises his mother. . . . It is best for the race that women should be our inferiors. Let a woman eat of the tree of knowledge and she will wreck the future of the human race as Eve did. Let her lose her modesty, and she is damned. It is that we seek to guard. Granting that she serves the man she loves, what more does any woman ask? For the man who cannot enslave them and reserve them to himself women feel no respect, no passion. You must have gathered that much."

He spoke as if under strong excitement, and Riccardo noticed that he had dropped into the use of "we" applied to the Eastern rather than the Western. But the look of fanaticism disappeared as suddenly as it had come. Si Ismael was suave Conradin again.

"And your relatives?" he continued, with an abrupt change of subject. "They are well?" He replenished the young man's glass.

"Yes, thank you."

"And you like your work?"

"It is new to me at present, but I shall soon get into it."

"Your uncle's business is a growing one, I have heard."

"He appears to be prosperous," Riccardo replied. Conradin reflected.

"You have three cousins, you said?"

"Yes, two girls and their brother."

"Ah yes! a brother. I suppose that your uncle will give him a leading part in his business soon?"

Riccardo drank down the champagne.

"I do not know." He was still cautious.

"It is strange that he should need the help of a nephew—if the observation is not impertinent."

He waited, but Riccardo did not offer a comment.

"Nevertheless, you have my sincere wishes for your success. Signor Scarfi's daughters are said to be pretty girls."

"They are," Riccardo answered, with genuine enthusiasm.

"The Signora, your aunt, was a beautiful woman. I remember seeing her at the Résidence balls when I first came to Tunis. Madame Tresali, who sold Tunis to the French, was then still good-looking; and your aunt, a young bride then, was the only woman who competed with her."

Riccardo was interested. He had heard from his mother that his Aunt Giovanna had been a pretty woman. She was said, he knew, to have been something of a rebel as well.

"You resemble her," Conradin said.

"My mother has often told me so," Riccardo replied. "She was devoted to her sister, and was heart-broken when she died."

"Perhaps you will make the tie between your uncle and yourself a yet closer one?"

"I have not heard that an alliance is contemplated," said Riccardo, with Sicilian candour. "And I do not think of marrying myself just yet. . . . There is time. I am young."

"Yes, you are young."

"By the way," Riccardo began, "I went to see that dancer you told me about."

"Ah! What did you think of it?"

"To tell you the truth, my recollections of it are confused. I smoked something which my cousin told me afterwards must have been hashish. I am unaccustomed to smoking, and this had a curious effect upon me. An Arab there helped my cousin to get me home." He laughed merrily. "But I thought it wonderful—Mabrouka I mean, not the others. That was odd rather than beautiful."

"How did you discover her name?"

"They called it out, I think. I really do not remember. The whole evening seems more or less cloudy."

"It is a fairly common name—it means 'fortunate' in Arabic," Conradin said. "Mabrouka is well-known among Arabs, but foreigners do not see her often."

"Why does she keep her face veiled?" Riccardo asked quickly.

"A trick to arouse curiosity perhaps." His light blue eyes contracted slightly. "Did you talk to her?"

"No, my cousin did, it seems."

"He is fond of native dancing?"

"He dislikes it," Riccardo answered, with a smile. "But he came with me to show me the way."

"You must introduce him to me some day," Conradin said; "and it would give me great pleasure to meet his sisters as well. I have so often spoken to their mother.

But my visits to Tunis are so hurried as a rule that I dare not make an appointment. I never know when I shall be called away. For this reason I was grateful to you for accepting an invitation at short notice this evening."

"If the opportunity arises, monsieur, I shall be delighted to present you. I have already spoken of you to them—I even mistook some one for you yesterday, and pointed him out to my cousin, Gioconda; but she informed me that it was Si Ismael ben Aloui, who bears a remarkable likeness to you."

"I have often been mistaken for Si Ismael, even by Arabs," Conradin replied, without betraying embarrassment. "Such resemblances are not at all uncommon. An Italian statesman once told me he had an unillustrious double who was more than once pursued by an enthusiastic crowd, during a crisis, when my friend was at the height of his popularity. But the resemblance proved unfortunate for the poor fellow, for he was stabbed in Marseilles—it was believed in mistake, as my friend had incurred the enmity of the Mafia."

"The Mafia again!" Riccardo cried. "The curse of our country!"

"You are a Sicilian and from Girgenti, and yet not a mafioso!"

Riccardo's brain was inflamed by champagne. In his own country he would not have dared to discuss the subject with any one who was not his most trusted friend: here in Tunis, in conversation with an Arab who seemed a Frenchman, or a Frenchman who seemed an Arab—what matter which!—it seemed a subject upon which he could be eloquent. Like many of the younger Sicilian generation he was for sweeping the

Mafia off the face of the earth. But he found his host ready to defend it. Conradin displayed an intimate knowledge of the Mafia which surprised him. His argument was that such secret societies were the logical outcome of past and present misrule, and that they were healthy manifestations of a diseased state. They had their right to exist as the remains of a national system of justice which had exercised the authority of its courts undisturbed by changes in dynasty and nominal government.

At the end of a hot discussion, Riccardo woke up suddenly to the fact that it was getting late. He bade his host farewell; and the decorous man-servant helped him into his overcoat. As he put his arms into its sleeves, he thought of fresh arguments in answer to Conradin's sophistries. He had forgotten the problem of strange resemblances.

CHAPTER VI

THE door had closed behind him.

For a moment he stood in the empty street. Every night-wanderer who was not in the casinos or cafés was promenading the avenue, or wandering towards the dark quarter inhabited by women of many nations and one profession. He lingered on the doorstep and took deep draughts of the fresh air. The champagne had inflamed his blood: the conversation had quickened his intellect. He felt the glorious omnipotence of youth. The romance of possibility, the possibility of romance stretched out before him.

A carriage coming up the street broke the silence. When it was a little way off, he noticed that the coachman was in a turban and flowing robes. To his wine-heated fancy the contrast between the Biblical figure and the modern brougham appeared exquisitely ludicrous, and he waited to watch it pass. It stopped. The turbaned figure in its baggy breeches, bare legs, and heelless slippers, descended from the box and opened the door.

A woman emerged, with care and deliberation. Below the long full trousers he heard the clink of her silver anklets, the *khal-khal* which are gradually being discarded by the women of the city. A white haik covered the rest, and over her face hung a flower-

embroidered shawl of black silk, which she held at elbow's length away from her, so as to enable her to see at least a foot of the way.

Riccardo stepped into the shadow of a projecting doorway.

She did not walk with the timid gait of the ordinary Arab woman. There was a litheness, a full swing from the hips and impatient freedom in her movements as she walked down the street that he had not seen in any veiled figure of the street or bazaar.

It was evident that the brougham had stopped at the wrong number, for she scanned each door. Riccardo thought she would come upon him, as he skulked in the shadow of the recess, but she stopped at No. 3 and pressed the bell. In the light of the great electric street-globe Riccardo saw the door open again. The man-servant appeared. He heard her voice, contralto, yet somewhat childish in accent. She was speaking in Arabic. The man replied in quick, hurried tones. She asked him a number of short questions, to which he replied. Then she handed him a packet. He took it, murmured something else, and shut the door. The carriage was drawn up a few doors farther down, the turbaned coachman beside the horses' heads.

A spirit of adventure seized Riccardo. He stepped out of the shadow.

"Can I assist you, madame?"

She started, and regarded him through her veil. For a moment he expected her to scream or to summon her coachman to her aid. Or, could she be one of the *célébrités galantes* of the town with whom Conradin might have an intimacy?

She did not answer at once, and he was aware that she was still scrutinising him from behind her tiresome

veil. He could swear at any rate that she was supple and young. The hand that she had extended to the servant was not the hand of an old woman, though it was henna-stained down to the first joints of the fingers.

"*Eh bien, monsieur*—do you not know that the French Government has penalties for those who address Tunisian ladies?"

She had spoken at last, and in French, adorable lisping French, with an inimitable softness of vowel and unevenness of accent.

"Madame, I am a stranger."

He thought he saw a little tremor of fear or laughter.

"I ask your pardon . . . I spoke on impulse, seeing that you appeared to be in doubt——" he concluded lamely.

The tremor could not have been caused by fear, for her voice was clear as she made her next remark.

"I fear that your solicitude, monsieur, might not be understood by most Tunisian women."

She turned, and began to clink down the street towards the brougham. Riccardo watched her with regret.

She got in, while the Arab coachman held the door. He closed it; she gave him a direction, he ascended the box and gathered up the reins. The carriage passed Riccardo and went down the street. He stared after it. It stopped again. The coachman had descended and was running back down the street. It was possible that he had dropped something. No, it could not be that, for he did not even look at the ground. When he reached the young man, he addressed him in torrential Arabic. Riccardo shrugged his shoulders. But the coachman seized his hand, and

Riccardo suddenly realised that he was expected to follow the man back to the carriage. There never yet was a Sicilian who hesitated for reasons of prudence when an adventure offered itself in which a woman was concerned. Riccardo allowed himself to be led towards the carriage. The door was open.

"Entrez, monsieur!"

The door was shut upon him, the windows were sealed, the brougham was rattling over the paving. Retreat was useless, even if he had desired it.

The figure opposite him was a mere white bundle in the unlit brougham, and it leant back in its shapeless swathings without movement. Riccardo grew conscious of the scent of jasmine that filled the carriage. His senses, already sur-excited, began to swim. He was a Southerner, and susceptible to the sensuous influence of perfumes. It seemed to come and go like a breath. Perhaps it was her breath. She seemed scarcely living, a heap of silken garments without form. Yet he felt his pulses leaping in answer to that throbbing perfume. There was something insidiously feminine in it. •

He became suddenly impatient at the silence. The allurements of the blank walls, the baffling dumbness of the East, the appeal of things secret and hidden became embodied for him in the veiled woman whose draperies brushed his knee. He leant forward, found and caught a warm bare hand, with little pulses beating in it, and an intoxicatingly soft palm, fragrant with jasmine. He carried it to his lips and kissed it again and again—devoured it with kisses. Its contact fevered and cooled his mouth like ice and fire. It struggled a little and then remained passive, while she laughed the stifled laughter of a child who cannot

repress its merriment. He did not doubt but that she contemplated him as a lover; else why should she have invited him to enter her carriage at midnight.

"Unveil yourself, *chérie*, unveil yourself!" His impatient fingers were on her haik.

But she pushed away his violating hand.

"Do not touch me, monsieur; or I shall demand my coachman to open the door for you to descend. You are my guest as long as you obey me. Otherwise, I bid you good-night. Do you understand? I make you an offer—either to rest here and give me your word of honour that you will behave as I wish—or to descend at the Cathedral which I see approaching."

"*A quoi bon?*" the young Sicilian murmured impatiently. "Am I a woman?"

"The choice, monsieur, is yours."

He considered. "I give you my parole."

"*Eh! la, la!* The child is a little sulky," she said in a caressing, impudent voice. "Just now, you offered to serve me."

"And you refused, madame."

"Provisionally, *mon ami*. I am *ennuyée*, tired. I have been concerned in an affair of business, very dull, very important. I want to be amused—I want to forget."

He fancied that there was a break in her voice as she ended her sentence. "As I saw you just now in the street it occurred to me that I had seen your face before. Yours is not a face one could forget. Ugly faces one tries to forget quickly—*pouf!* but what is beautiful one conserves in the memory."

"Where did you see me?"

"I do not recollect. It does not matter. Yes, you are beautiful. Your mother—was she pretty? Does she live? Does she adore you?"

"My mother was beautiful, I believe, when she was young."

She regarded him lazily from behind her veil.

"And women, they become foolish because of that face of yours? Women—no, monsieur, no, no, do not move! It fatigues me to be touched. . . . Tell me about your love affairs, *cher enfant*. Make them true, or as true as you can; and embroider them if you like. But amuse me." For the second time Riccardo thought he detected a peevish note in the phrase, like that of a sick child asking for fairy-tales.

"There is nothing to tell," he said. "I have loved no one. And if I had," he added with mischief, "it is wise to forget."

"But you have been loved," she insisted merrily.

"But of course." The question surprised him.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, with a tinkle of laughter, "I have it! You are an Italian."

"Of Sicily, madame."

"*Fi donc!* A Sicilian, and you say you have never loved. That is the oldest lie men tell to women. But, if your memory of your love affairs is so bad, you must tell me something else. Your priests, to them you tell everything, do you not? *Eh bien*, I will be your priest."

Riccardo fell into her humour. "You may rather catechise me, madame, as the judge does a thief—only that you are in reality the thief."

"Because I have——"

"Stolen my peace," he said, with racing pulses and vibrating voice. "You ask much of me—and give me nothing."

"Our friendship and the night are both young."

When they are older — *qui sait?*” she replied in cool tones. “Meanwhile, if you prefer——”

“Madame, my parole is given.”

“*Bien*, my child, be good. You have just come from Sicily? You are travelling through Tunis?”

“Tunis is to be my home, my country. I am poor, and have come to Tunis to make my living,” he answered, with some bitterness.

“And you have no friends here—no one you know?”

“My uncle and cousins live here.”

“Ah then, you are not alone. . . . Tell me about them,” she said eagerly.

He gave her some description of his relations.

“This Sal-vat-tori—*quel nom!* that is how he is called? He is not then very clever?”

“I did not say so.”

“Ah, but of him you speak without pleasure. . . . I hear it.”

Riccardo laughed. “Oh, he is agreeable enough. But his tastes are not mine, that is all.”

“You will find many like him, here. Also in every big city. They are pigs—without sense. I know them.”

“Ah, you have travelled!” he cried, pricking up his ears.

“A little. . . . But this Sal-vat-tori Scarfi. . . . The name sounds familiar, just as your face is familiar. And what do you at your office——?”

The overlong vowels were as caressing as an endearment. Her voice was as seductive as most women’s mouths.

“It is a shipping office: we export dates and other goods. . . . But it doesn’t amuse you to hear about this?”

"But yes! Now I have made a history for you. You come over to Tunis; you marry the beautiful cousin; the stupid Sal-vat-tori is given little, but you are made the head of the office and grow very rich. . . . *pom! C'est fini!*"

He laughed. "That is a pretty fairy-tale!"

"Ah, but true, perhaps?"

"It is not probable."

"But do you not think that your uncle will give you his business and not this Sal-vat-tori?"

The idea had occurred to him before. "It is possible," he admitted, more to himself than to her.

She clapped her hands with a clatter of bangles. "There! the tale comes true then, already. . . . And you have no other friends in Tunis?"

"Yes, one—a man I met on the boat—Conradin."

"Conradin!" she repeated.

"Yes — at whose house you knocked to-night, madame."

"Ah——" She made an abrupt exclamation in Arabic, but offered no explanation.

A silence fell between them. The curtains which screened the carriage windows had been drawn when Riccardo had entered. There were no lights now—only the green moonlight on a broad white road, and dark gum-trees. The carriage creaked and crunched stones. They were evidently no longer in the city. For the first time Riccardo wondered where they were going. The monotonous rumble of the wheels was the only thing that marked their moving. A drowsiness crept over his senses—as if the fumes of the hashish still lingered in his body. Perhaps it was the scent of the jasmine.

"Where are we going? . . ." he asked.

"To the city of the dead," she replied. "I sometimes spend a night there. . . . It pleases me to be there alone."

"And to-night——?" he asked.

"To-night," she responded, "you will be with me."

He said nothing.

Where was the city of the dead? He did not know what she meant, but that was nothing. It was part of this whimsical adventure. The gum-trees were silhouetted in black, and the moon glittered here and there upon a white roof—perhaps a house, but sleeping and still. They must have driven for an hour already. The hoofs of the two horses beat on steadily like the refrain to a song. The road was smooth. Now they passed through a village, silent as a group of tombs. She reached to the red curtains and drew them.

"Wait," she said.

He guessed now where they were going. She was taking him to Carthage. . . . He could hear the soft splash of the sea above the noise of the wheels.

The carriage had stopped at last, and the door opened. He jumped out, and turned to help her. Her *khal-khal* jingled as she descended, thrilling him unreasonably; they were like the sound of fetters. The dark silken veil hid her face, the haik concealed her form. The carriage had drawn up close to a disused cistern. High above them towered a huge building—Riccardo recognised it as the Cardinal's cathedral which Conradin had abused as they had passed it the morning of his arrival. The sea lay around them, below them; separated only by fields of

barley. Neither of them felt a desire to speak. The Arab who had driven them was busy with the unharnessing of the horses.

He was looking across Carthage, the dead city—Carthage, where the ashes of Dido and the dust of three civilisations had been ploughed and sown and harvested for many thousand moons and many thousand nights of stars. The young barley shivered as a vagrant breeze from the sea caressed the green ears. It sounded like a human sigh: the buried dead sigh sometimes through the growing things above them, says the legend, when they dream of love and the full moon falls on the fruitful bed of lovers. The very asphodel that the Bedouin girl pulls in the spring during her too brief maidenhood, as she herds her father's hobbled asses, has drawn its life-sap from the dust of these dead. The pitcher she balances on her head is baked from the clay of the dead city.

Of this Riccardo did not think—he only felt the magic by which the dead hold the living. He remembered vaguely the history he had read when he was at school in the big yellow house by the lemon groves at Palermo, when Carthage was a name to him. He remembered how his truant eyes had strayed from his book to the sea, and the blue mount of Pellegrino rising sheer above it. He had liked to think of the stern Carthaginian who had held that sacred rock for three summers and winters, three seedtimes and harvests.

Above them, the moon, golden as honey, rose full and triumphant. The magic of the dead city and the young corn made tumult in his heart: the enchantment of the Eastern night, sweeter than day, seemed to turn the story of the alien Dido into a romance with

which his soul was mysteriously interwoven, a romance that lay beneath his feet in the very dust of the highway, and before his eyes in the young ears that bent to the caress of each light wind.

He stooped to break off an ear and press it to his cheek. It was cool and fresh, and wet with the dew that was the sweat of a thirsty land.

"Listen," said his companion.

He listened. There was the sougning of the sea, where the moon danced upon a million facets; the far-off barking of a Kabyle dog, the guardian of some poor Bedouin tents; the silken rustle of the barley. Then there came the distant sound of an African drum, a bendir, dull as a heart-beat, resonant, melancholy, regular. Some one was singing in the Bedouin camp down by the sea—a fugitive, crooning song, without melody, without gaiety, full of the unspeakable weariness of life and love and death.

"That is a desert song," she said. "I used to hear it when I was little. They have travelled up from the Zibans perhaps."

She spoke in a low voice.

"You, madame——" he began; but she stopped him by a movement.

"Hush!" she said in a whisper.

He moved close to her, without further speech.

The song died. There was only the plashing of the African sea.

She made a sign and preceded him down a narrow path through the barley, clinking softly as she went. She was gay as a child. She moved with a dancing springiness of gait that was unimpeded by her full trousers, her wreathing haik and heavy silver fetters. She swayed as she walked like the barley; as if she

too had suffered some metempsychosis since she had left the close air of the little black carriage.

He followed her, noticing that the Arab who had driven them walked closely in his wake. He bore a large basket of plaited *halfa* grass in his hand. The carriage had been drawn into the shadow of a cistern—perhaps he had tethered the horses close by.

At length she paused, so suddenly that she almost ran into the Sicilian's arms.

"Said!"

The Arab came running up.

"Excuse me, monsieur," she said to Riccardo. "I am obliged to speak to Said in my own tongue. He does not comprehend French."

Said smiled at her as a dog smiles into his master's eyes. He was still young, but his features bore the imprint of a dull lassitude which appeared to Riccardo unnatural.

The order was reversed. She went first as before; Said next, Riccardo the last of the three. The scent of bean flowers, sweet as loam after rain, exhaled from one of the patches tilled by the White Fathers of the sun-baked monastery on the hill of the Byrsa. They bruised herbs at every step—thyme, sage, mint, and marjoram. Withered asphodels—their flowers had browned two full months ago—stood on a ridge in skeleton outline, and beneath them the yellow moon discovered a bed of marigolds and borage, in a foot or two of untilled soil. Beyond the fields the sea danced to the melody of the stars.

It was a night of moods. There was an exaltation in the atmosphere, a quickening in the spirit. His blood throbbed to the measure of the clinking anklets in front. The night and their friendship were young:

and when the night was older—what then! His youth sang within him, but his heart was sad, as all Southern nations are sad, with the whole of pleasure and the burden of desire.

They reached a broad road. There was no longer any need to walk in single file.

Perhaps she was pleased at his silence. She turned round and waited for him, then signed to Said to walk behind.

"You are not tired, madame?"

"I, tired!" she gave a little laugh.

"I thought that the Arab ladies never walked."

"Most of them do not. I am not of good birth. I have no father or brothers. Women like I am are of all countries."

"Women like you are?" he repeated.

"I am a dancer," she said. "My mother was a dancer too. I was born before she was fifteen. I do not know who my father was. He may have been a Roumi, for I am very white. . . . But I was little when I left her. But my heart is good Mussulman, perhaps even my soul," she added.

"I thought that no Mahommedan woman had a soul," Riccardo objected.

"That is a missionary's lie."

"I have never known a missionary in my life."

"Then I have that advantage over you, monsieur."

"Tell me——"

"There are many in Tunis. . . . Once years ago, in Algiers, I thought I should like to become a Christian. I knew many Christians then. I had a French governess. I went with her into the Maltese Church, where a great white Christ was nailed naked to a cross. He was beautiful, that Christ. It used to

make me weep to think that a man beautiful and so young should be tortured: by Jewish dogs, too! Sometimes women whose children had died, or whose lovers had left them, used to come in to pray. They kissed his feet, and wept over them. . . . I never dared to go close to it. I watched them. One cannot love Mahomet as they love their Christ. One cannot caress his image as though it were flesh and blood."

"And why did you not become a Christian?" he asked curiously.

"For many reasons. . . . It is wrong after all to worship these dolls . . . and it is too sad. This wounded Jesus; this weeping woman they worship—they are always sad. One must not weep—one must laugh. The Christians are not happy—they are not even beautiful or clean. It is better as we are."

"Did any one ever try to convert you?"

She gave a little stifled laugh. "A *Père Blanc mon ami!* I was sick. He gave me medicines and came often until I was well. But I got tired of it. . . . There was a little dirty dog that was kept by an Italian not far from us. The boys stoned it—and he found it dying in the street. He carried it with his hands into our courtyard, and then sat down to eat couscouss with us without washing away the defilement. He had even let it lick his face with its filthy tongue. No, they are not clean, these people."

She thought for a moment.

"Ah yes, I remember. I grew angry with him because he persisted. So one evening during Ramadan I pretended I was sick, and he came to me. I danced to him. I wanted to make him love me . . . he was so cold—and yet not old, scarcely more than

thirty years. But he was angry. He almost struck me. He went away and came no more. In your religion there is no room for love."

"In mine there is," Riccardo said quickly.

"That is because you are not a good Christian. Regard these missionaries! Regard their wives! There is one who used to visit the harem where I lived when I was young. That was in the desert. She was ugly, and very thin save in the stomach. She had no breasts. She told us her husband was very kind to her. One of the women asked why. And she said, 'Because he loves me.' And we knew she lied."

She was as serious as a child; but Riccardo laughed. "Then you think to love the ugly is impossible?"

She appeared to reflect.

"A woman may desire a man who has no beauty. A woman will weave silken garments out of a hempen rope if her heart is the loom. But how can a man desire the hideous, such as the wife of the missionary? She had not even borne him a child. We have a proverb which says, 'The beauty of a man lies in his intelligence, the intelligence of a woman in her beauty.'"

"I do not know," Riccardo said. "The Americans and Germans and English often marry such women—for love, they say. We Sicilians do sometimes—for money."

"And you, when you marry, will you marry for love or for money?"

"For both, I hope," said Riccardo.

"Ah, you are Sicilian. They say that Sicilian marriages are almost like ours. But what does it matter. It is best for a family if the parents have

chosen with prudence whom the children shall marry. Then when love comes, it comes from Allah. The heart will not wear fetters . . ." She laughed sagely, but the laughter was wistful.

"Yet in the North," she went on, "they say husbands choose their wives, and love them as we do our lovers. . . . But I never found them so," she added with curious naïveté.

"You have been to the North!" he exclaimed, surprised.

"To London, even. Did I not say I was of all countries. An agent came to Alexandria when I was there. He offered me much money. There was an exposition in London at a place called—I forget. I was to dance in a little room. It was miserable—so cold—and the voyage—what a misery! I was there for two months. I had with me an old woman, and she was constantly ill; her name was Nedjma. At last she died. Then I broke my contract and went away with a Russian to Paris. I lived with him for six months, and he brought me here. London was *triste, triste!* They made me go. I knew no English, neither did Nedjma. It rained very much, and I had *la grippe*. I was glad when the Russian brought me away."

"Is he here now?" Riccardo asked, with a sudden jealousy.

"No. I left him, and went to other cities . . ." She broke off with a laugh.

"What is it?"

"Nothing, *mon cher*—but we talk of London, on such a night! And I wanted to forget . . ."

"To forget what?" he asked curiously.

She made no answer.

He repeated the question.

"What does that matter, my friend! Perhaps I shall tell you, perhaps not."

They walked on in silence, until she said, as if she feared she had hurt him—

"Do you not like my city?"

She pointed to her left.

"Do you see those grassy humps from the ground down there? Those were once Roman cisterns, they say. Bedouins and shepherds use them as shelters and houses. . . . Up there," she pointed towards the headland, "the White Fathers dug down to the rock, and they found tombs cut deep as wells—chambers and passages. There were wonderful things in them too; stone coffins, carved and coloured, in which the people of a long time ago laid their dead. It seems curious to think that people have lived so long ago and have died, and for nothing."

"That is an old problem," said Riccardo, lazily amused by her seriousness.

"They were worshippers of idols, for it was before the time of Mahomet. I have heard that the White Fathers keep many of their idols in a garden—*là haut!* An Arab who knows much about these things told me about them, but I have forgotten the larger part. . . . Yes, I remember. One they worshipped with fire, and he devoured children. Another was a goddess; and they worshipped her with desire: therefore her priestesses were beautiful and her priests comely. But I forget such talk, it is too learned for me."

CHAPTER VII

THEY walked on. The prickly figs grew here as plentifully as in Sicily; and agaves here and there shot long green columns into the moonlight. They were near their flowering and their death; for the agave dies as soon as its tall ladder of white buds have shown their hearts to the sun. Trees there were none, save an occasional isolated carob, black as a yew, or a solitary palm. They had left the barley behind them. Here and there the dark outline of a *gourbi* arose a little above the surface, where the khermes slept with his tired wives, and not far distant they could see the Bedouin tents from which the desert song had come, low as beehives; camels and donkeys hobbled beside them.

On an eminence, a mile away, lay the little flat city of Sidi-bou-Said, in which Saint Louis of France has a mosque of inviolable sanctity, and is revered as a notable convert and holy marabout—the whiteness of its roofs and domes softened by the moon to the ivory of a woman's breasts.

Innumerable scents came towards them. The perfume that his companion wore merged with the rest, the primal breathings of the salt sea and fresh earth; just as her whole presence seemed to Riccardo part of the spirit of the full moon and the dead city.

They again crossed a field, lying fallow, on a declivity, and Riccardo saw in front of them, in a slight

hollow, the scattered ruins of a vast building or group of buildings ; columns, blocks, stones, without meaning ; blanched, dead, and very still. Here and there a slender monolith had been re-erected, and blocks placed upright near each other in rough semblance of a plan. A scholar might have spelt out something from this ; but Riccardo saw only a confusion of whiteness, as though a petulant child or god had tumbled down his bricks and forgotten them. To their left curved the road which led up towards the holy city of Sidi-bou-Said, set on the hill above the sea.

The woman walked lightly ; picking her way over broken pavement and prostrate columns ; her anklets clink-clinking as she went. For all her draperies she moved as cleverly as a cat, keeping her veil held out six inches before her, and balancing herself by the swaying of her body this way and that. It was not easy to walk : Riccardo stumbled at every step. Though it was almost as light as day, the shadows were inky-black—each separate shadow looked like a chasm in the earth.

Countless wild-flowers grew in the crevices and in the browned grass. Marigolds, whose pungent scents betrayed them more than their closed orange corollas ; purple, blue, and white vetches ; blue borage and succamele ; scarlet sanfoin, starry garlic, tall withered asphodels, and hosts of others ; all robbed of their colour by the witchcraft of the full moon.

She came to a halt at last before what appeared to be a semicircular mouth of a cavern, or foundation. It was a vaulted chamber, still roofed in ; protected from the sirocco by the bank which rose behind it. The entrance was higher than the level of the ground. Riccardo made a movement to help her, but she pushed

back his hand with a little exclamation and jumped up into the moon-illuminated entrance. The whole field of ruins lay before them, and the undulating low champaign beyond; the snowy cathedral and the monastery of the fathers on the highest hill.

Said leapt up after them, his basket in his hand, which he deposited in the dark interior. Riccardo drew a long breath. Somewhere close by a goat bleated softly. It might have strayed. There was no answering call from a flock. It carried Riccardo back to Sicily: he seemed to hear the dumb scuttle of the goats' feet at sundown as they were driven into Girgenti, to be milked at every few yards into the pitchers and cups of frugal housewives; or the distant clanking of their bells as they homed out of the city with lightened udders to their shelters on the hills, half-way to the dead temples. Those very temples had been stripped by the armies of Carthage.

"Of what are you thinking?" she asked.

"My home," he replied.

"To me every place is home," she said, without sadness.

A savoury smell began to float towards their nostrils—a goodly smell that brought them back to the very present earth. She clapped her hands.

"I hope your appetite is good, *mon ami*. *Quant à moi*—I am ravenous."

"I am always hungry three hours after a meal," Riccardo declared healthfully.

"*Bon!* You are young—" she laughed. "*Tiens!*" she cried again. "I forgot! To-night we have a guest—there must be flowers on the table to honour

him!" She jumped down again, like a child after a butterfly, and ran into an open patch where the wild-flowers were thickest. They were damp with dew, and their colour had died with the sun; in the daytime the wild bees would have been busy amongst them. Riccardo followed her.

"*Cueille ! cueille !*—pick, pick!" she said gaily. She held a trail of morning glory towards him. "The flowers are shut, the foolish ones!"

"So are the marigolds, madame. They have veiled their faces like yours."

"The marigolds? Ah—we call that the *tuefs*. They bring good fortune. There are poppies over there—they do not sleep. We will have poppies."

They gathered a bunch each, snapping each flower off its hairy stem, discarding the over-blown and the pale green buds; picking only the satiny young flowers which had burst their sheaths that evening and were erect and wiry.

"Take care—they stain," she said, sitting down on the stump of a column. "The juice of poppies never washes out. It is like the blood of those who have been murdered without just cause. There is a house in the Jewish quarter where an Arab was murdered three centuries ago, and to this day his blood stains the wall where he fell. To-day the house is used as a storehouse: no one will live there. It is haunted by a djinn, they say."

"Do you believe in djinns?"

"Hush!" she said fearfully, sinking her voice. "It is not good to utter their name in this place. They say it is full of *that people*."

"Here we are safe," Riccardo said, signing himself, "for this path is shaped like a cross." He pointed to

the cross-like formation made by the chance meeting of two paved ways.

Like a true Tunisian, she paid instinctive homage to the magical symbol of another faith.

"A djinn was seen by the Bab Djedid only three weeks ago. Si Hamouda was returning in his carriage from a *fantasia* at the Bardo. He stayed at the house of a friend; it was already near midnight when he arrived at the Djedid Gate. When he was passing it his horses reared. The street was almost empty; there was no obstacle. The horses plunged: the more the coachman beat them, the more they refused to move. Si Hamouda ordered the man to cease whipping them, and himself got out to examine the horses. They trembled like the pepa grass. Their mouths were covered with foam and their eyes white with fear. Then Si Hamouda saw a djinn. It grew out of the empty space a foot beyond the horses' heads. It was like a great negro, it shot up some ten or twelve feet into the air. Si Hamouda is very brave. The coachman nearly died of terror, but Si Hamouda bowed his head to the dust and asked what it wanted of him. It replied that it desired him that night to set some of his family papers out on the roof of his house. Si Hamouda said that when he raised his head the djinn was gone; and that the horses, when he remounted, went quietly home. That night he placed the papers on the roof of his house as the djinn had commanded him. At midnight there was a great noise, as if a great many people were upon the roof. No one dared to see what it was, but the next morning the papers were gone. The djinn had flown away with them."

"What were the papers?"

"Something relating to some mosque property—a

habous estate, I think. But I do not know. They were talking of it in all the coffee-houses and the souks the next day."

Her lisping voice was a music to which he could have listened a year.

"Tell me another story about djinns."

"No, no! It is not good to tell them here. If Lalla were here she would tell you many such tales. She is a sorceress and has charms to protect herself."

"Who is Lalla?"

"She is a rich negress. She was at Kairouan once, but she came here to make her fortune. There is no one who can tell tales like Lalla. One may grow old in listening and think that a half-hour is passed. There is no one in Tunis who can tell the adventures of Antar and Abba like Lalla, or the histories of the Thousand and One Nights."

"Who were Antar and Abba?"

"Two lovers. That is a long story."

Riccardo flung himself at her feet.

"Tell me the adventures of Antar."

"It is too long: it takes three months to read, even when it is read night following night in the coffee-houses."

"But part of it?"

"No, no . . . not now." She put out her hand and fondled his hair, smiling.

"How beautiful you are," she said, with a sound that was half a sigh and half a laugh.

His passion was stirred in a moment. The blood beat thickly in his ears.

"Send Said away," he pleaded quickly. He caught the bare hand and pressed it against his mouth.

"Not yet."

"When, when? *Cara mia*, you torture me . . ."

"You are hurting my hand . . . my wrist."

He released her. Her indefinable fragrance, her proximity, in this place and at this hour; the veil that hid her, made him desire her as he had desired no woman before.

"Take off your veil," he whispered. "Always this veil—*cette méchante!*" He was consumed with the longing to tear it off, to touch her.

"No. . . . Remember your promise, my friend."

He hesitated a moment, swayed by he knew not what. She was only a native dancing-woman; and he felt the dominance of the brutal Occident.

"Not yet . . ." she said in a soft voice, more to herself than to him. "For a little while . . . we will keep our friendship where it is. . . . We amuse ourselves—like this. We are happy like children, and I am tired. The weariness of the heart is not healed by lovers: it is healed by hours like these. . . . When I am old and can no longer dance, I shall come here night after night . . . to be healed.

"This can never grow old. Every springtime there are new flowers and green barley. There is always this sea, and these great nights. . . . In sh'Allah, I shall not be lonely.

"I shall not have children like the harem women. Those who dance the dance of the flesh cannot bear: the doctors will tell you that. Lovers in plenty they can have, but no children to lie in their hearts. . . . Their breasts must ache—they can never suckle. . . . But I shall not be lonely.

"Let us stay a little as we are . . . if only an hour."

CHAPTER VIII

OUT into the moonlight came a white figure—Said, smiling and inscrutable.

"Dinner is served," she said. "You will see how Said can cook. He is accustomed to these midnight suppers, but not to guests, so that if the arrangements of our cuisine do not please you, you must forgive us both. His little fire is behind, round here."

She took him to the rear of the sheltering bank and brickwork, where the red embers of a charcoal fire still glowed in the cup of some fallen masonry. Here Said appeared another being. His copper pan was still steaming on the ground. He laughed and chattered to his mistress as she turned to him to speak in their own tongue.

"Have you tasted couscouss?" she asked, leading the way to the entrance again.

"I don't even know what it is."

"Wait, you shall see. Europeans eat couscouss when they come here, just as they go to the souks to buy the hand of Fatma. No Arab woman grows up without learning to make it. Even rich women prepare the couscouss for their husbands."

They jumped up into their improvised banquetting hall, now lit by an oil-lamp placed at the entrance. Said had spread matting on the floor; and produced from heaven knows what hiding-place a couple of long,

soft cushions. He had relapsed into his former gentle sadness. His mistress dragged her cushion into the shadow and sat down cross-legged, while Riccardo, after an attempt to be comfortable in a similar position on his, chose rather to sit on a broken projection of the masonry, some ten inches from the floor, opposite his hostess.

A flat yellow dish was set on the floor, full of a steaming, savoury, appetising mess. She placed a ladleful on to a glazed earthenware saucer, and Said deposited it before him. He saw that he was to eat with his fingers, and did so.

She waited with keen, pretty anxiety.

"It is good, *hein?*"

He tasted it. It was palatable. He could liken it to nothing except a species of polenta, flavoured with cayenne and spices and creamy sauces, and mixed with every good thing besides.

"*Perfetta! Eccellente!*" he exclaimed in Italian. "What is it? This Said of yours, madame, is a genius."

"It is made of couscouss grain, and chicken and vegetables, and mutton and fruit, and whatever else one likes," she replied gravely. "It requires inspiration. Couscouss is a poem. It may be made by a hundred cooks in a hundred different ways—just as a hundred poets will write a song on a beautiful woman in a hundred different metres. Said is a good cook, and a good poet."

"A poet?" Riccardo laughed.

"But certainly—to the foot of the letter. He writes love-songs as well as he makes couscouss and sweetmeats."

"If he makes them half as well and quickly as he does this, he must be as divine a poet as Aretino."

She laughed. "You imagine that the couscous was made here—in this little half-hour? It was made in Tunis this forenoon, with all of the most delicate that Said has in his cuisine! It is not even cooked over the fire—it must be steamed gently, for hours, over charcoal, which glows to the perfection of heat. It has only been rewarmed here. We brought it with us."

Riccardo ate with the gusto of health and appetite. "And this genius—is he married?" he asked lightly.

"He is a eunuch," she said, stating the fact baldly and simply, and helping herself from the dish.

Riccardo was curious to see how she was going to manage to eat without removing her veil. But he had never witnessed the skilfulness of travelling Arab women, who can change every garment in the cramped space of a small balanka on a camel's back without apparent inconvenience. Submission to the veil has become part of themselves. She only turned it up a little way—its folds allowed her to carry her fingers to her mouth. To the Sicilian there was something unnatural in eating opposite to the black veil. At a meal, more than at any other time, one watches the face of one's companion.

But he could not see whether she smiled or was sad. He could not see if her eyes lighted or slept. He had never seen her face. Her voice, with its clinging, childish, minor inflections, was all that he had to know her by.

In spite of her protested hunger, she ate little; and though Said poured out wine for her guest from a bottle of Vin Ordinaire, she drank only water.

"I have a better wine for you, afterwards," she remarked. "But a good hostess keeps her best till last."

"What do they call wine in Tunis?" Riccardo asked indifferently.

She gave him the answer in the guttural Tunisian dialect, and laughed consumedly over his inability to pronounce the throat consonant.

"Try to make the noise of spitting," she said.

"That is as bad as German," Riccardo grumbled.

"Germans pronounce Arabic well. But it is not all in the accent of the throat. There are many words like your Italian—words that sing and caress."

"What is 'beautiful'?" he asked quickly.

"*'Alkif'*."

"Then, madame, you are *alkif, alkif, alkif!*" Riccardo cried, with merry eyes.

The grave Said smiled, and she laughed the gay laugh of a child.

"*Bravo, monsieur!* Soon you will speak Arabic like an Arab."

"If you would teach me——" he cried.

"Would you be a good pupil?"

"Have you not had proof already of my obedience?"

The bread was French. Fruit followed the couscous; orange loquots, scarlet oranges, and dried figs, and a variety of curious sweetmeats, all of which Riccardo tasted.

"This is like Ramadan," she said, during a pause.

"Why?"

"Because then we always do our eating by night. At Ramadan we fast by day as you do at your Carême; but at night we have feasts and carnivals. We eat nothing from sunrise, we smoke nothing, we drink nothing. But as soon as the sun has gone down, we eat. The cafés are full till long past midnight, and there are shadow-shows of the most amusing, and dances in the streets. You should see

Tunis an hour before midnight at Ramadan! It is gay, gay! Paris has nothing of so gay. Every one is in the streets—of course excepting the women."

"What do they do to amuse themselves?"

"It is enough for us to see each other, to talk and drink coffee, and to listen to stories. Our people are not like the French, who need to be amused like children, or the English, who go to watch dogs running up ladders at their casinos. But many Arabs go to the Casino like the French on the nights of Ramadan. Story-tellers and musicians go round to all the harems of rich men, and grow pallid—not because of the fast, but because of the sweet things they must eat in each house. The dancing-girls grow rich too, for their visitors are many. . . . Then, at last, after eating once more, every one sleeps. . . . But an hour before dawn negroes run through the town beating drums and pans, and batter on the doors with heavy hammers, to waken every one. The women prepare a meal; the men eat and smoke. As the sun rises over the walls, and the cannon booms, they throw away their cigarettes, and tap the kif from their pipes, and rise from their food—the fast begins again."

"They must get very little sleep then."

"They sleep at noon. At midday the town is as dead as this Carthage."

"Do you fast?"

"But certainly," she laughed.

"How long does it last?"

"Till the new moon appears. Sometimes the news is sent from some country mosque—a muezzin has seen the new moon at sunset prayer—a thin slip in the east, as timid as a young girl who has never been

unveiled to men. A telegram is sent to Tunis—quickly. The news spreads. It is proclaimed from the mosques. Every one goes mad with joy. The Little Feast begins. . . . Said has made a song about the young moon of Bairam," she continued, signing to him to fill her glass.

"Say it to me," Riccardo said.

The soft, incomprehensible Arabic, with its lazy gutturals, exercised a fascination over Riccardo's facile imagination. He glanced at Said to see whether he showed any pleasure at hearing his verses on his mistress's lips. But the Arab had shrunk back into the shadow with a sudden, fierce movement, leaving the glass half-filled. His face was tense with a kind of concentrated passion. Riccardo stared at him curiously. For a moment he thought he detected a flicker of hate, but as Said's eyes met his own the flame died in them, and they became once more passionless and melancholy.

"What does it mean?"

"It is a love-song," she replied. "But I cannot translate it well. This is what it means—

"I saw the moon of Ramadan
Looking through the ban-tree
Whose saffron stems were swaying,
And I asked of her her name.
She answered me 'Lou-lou' (A pearl),
I cried 'Li-hi' (For me, for me!)
But to me she said 'La-la!' (No, no!)

"You see it is a play on words—so that it sounds foolish in another language. Besides, the moon of Ramadan with us means something which is desired, like the lips of the beloved. In our Arabic it is beautiful."

Said was crouched against the wall. She turned

and said something to him in the language that was theirs by birthright. Riccardo felt excluded, curiously jealous. His eyes burnt into the veil that they could not pierce.

"Have you finished?" she asked.

"It has been a meal for the gods."

"Then Said shall remove the dishes—But let him refill your glass first."

She leant back on her cushion with exquisite languor. The poppies that they had forgotten strewed the threshold, and filled the air with a medicinal scent, a drowsy perfume that vivified and deadened the brain simultaneously.

Said moved noiselessly: his yellow slippers lay at the mouth of the cavern. He carried the plates and dishes one by one round to the back, where his improvised cuisine was, and where, Riccardo supposed, he would give them some kind of lustration. But when the last had disappeared, and the matting was bare, he re-entered and sat down at the entrance, his thin, bronze-coloured legs crossed under him, and his dog-like eyes fixed on the ruined basilica. Suddenly she seemed to realise his presence, and gave him an abrupt order.

He made no reply, but rose, shadow-like and silent as ever, a gaunt black figure against the yellow-whiteness of the moon-lit wilderness of stone without. He somehow reminded Riccardo of Annunziata's flamingoes, dumb, and without legitimate freedom.

She spoke again in a petulant tone.

He extinguished the lamp which had filled the interior of their shelter with a wayward light, and disappeared, as though he had been bidden to extinguish himself like the wick.

The silence was greater than Riccardo could bear.

"Shall I tell you another poem?" she asked lazily, at length.

"As you will." He used the "thou."

"What shall it be?"

"Of love," he answered, smiling, and breathing faster in the dark.

"I remember one that is very short," she said slowly, after a moment. "It is a song that the Bedouin women sing to their lovers—

"*Ia omri,
Ia gelbi,
Ia rochi,
Ia aini,
Oan motalik!*"

"That means—

"*'Thou art my life,
Thou art my heart,
Thou art my soul,
Thou art my eyes,
I die for thee.'*"

The primitive, passionate words, with their abandonment, their impotent desire, quivered as she uttered them, and came to an abrupt silence. They reminded him of the desert song they had heard to the beating of earthen drums that evening from the distant tents by the sea.

Instinct told him that her thought was not of him.

She crooned the melody softly to herself, and then they both relapsed into silence. There was a warm darkness in the cave; a brightness without. With the removal of the friendly human light of the lamp, and Said's dumb presence, the atmosphere had become charged with the unknown, primitive forces of night.

The mystery and vastness of the dead city entered

into his soul. He seemed to feel the dead present with him. A cool breath entered, and he shivered. It was as though these dead were stretching out chill hands to be warmed at his vitality. The worshippers of Baal, the dead priestesses of Tanith, breathed on him the terrible isolation of death, the desire of life. The extinguished lamp was a black spot in the silvered entrance. The dead ruled the place. The obliteration of the light became an act of significance.

The scent of the poppies filled him with languor. An indescribable loneliness and longing swept over his soul. He closed his eyes. The instinct of human beings was with him. The presence of the woman spoke to it. He desired but one thing, touch, contact.

Silence became louder than the beating of his own pulses. The distant drums that had sounded earlier had long ago ceased. There was only the plashing of the sea, a sound as of eternal tears, which sobbed, ebbed, and plashed again, a futile reiteration, like human birth and death and passion—vain, meaningless, insistent.

He leant on his elbows waiting. Yet still she did not give him the sign. She was very still: the song of the Bedouin women had set her thinking perhaps.

The moon was already waning; the shadows outside had become deeper and longer. There were so few hours before the day. Still he waited. It was scarcely ten minutes since the light had been extinguished, yet it seemed a lifetime. He waited for her signal.

“Riccardo!”

He suffocated. His senses rioted. He crept to her, leant over her. “You know my name!”

He laid no hand on her, but held himself back.

"Two, no, several, nights ago. I heard it then—when I saw you first."

"It was you . . . I knew it . . . I knew that it was you."

"Foolish one . . . were you not certain! An Arab would have guessed. Is there another who walks as I do in all the Regency?" Her voice was seductive, cajoling, soft, and full of vanity.

"Mabrouka!"

"And to-night," she went on, with the same coquetry; "to-night I knew thee at once."

He had no words.

"My little soul!"

"Yes."

"Raise my veil."

She laughed, cajolingly, sweetly, like a child.

"My little soul——"

"Yes."

"Thou wilt forget me."

"Never."

"But yes, that is only natural. I would have you remember something . . . that if danger comes, I am thy friend."

There was something so sincere, so abrupt in her declaration, that Riccardo was puzzled.

"What danger should there be?"

"One can never tell, in Tunis."

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly, his mind alive to a meaning in words beyond that which met the ear.

"Mean—*la, là!* Nothing, *mon vieux!*" Her tone had suddenly altered. She was defensive. "There is no need to think of danger. And there is that wine

I kept till last—the wine of which I spoke—we have forgotten it!”

He was jarred by the intrusion of a something which he could not comprehend.

“I am not thirsty for wine.” He bent swiftly to her.

“*Ei, Riccardo, aini*—how can I then speak!”

“Raise thy veil,” he pleaded in a stifled tone.

“Hast thou never heard, my Riccardo, that the rose droops when it is plucked too swiftly? At least drink the wine. Afterwards . . .” her voice sank, “the rose is thine, if thou canst raise thy hand to it.”

“I will drink afterwards,” he insisted.

“No, no!” she exclaimed, with merry perversity. “Now.”

He made a petulant movement. But ecstasy was so near to him that he could afford to dally with it.

“A *brindisi* to our next meeting,” she urged drowsily. “For this wine was distilled from the wines of Carthage—and wine made by these woman-hating monks will sweeten kisses. It has ripened for years in a deep earthen place, far from the sun. It is a love-potion, this wine; strong and warm like love itself.”

“Give it me, then,” he answered, yielding to her caprice.

“Wait. . . . I cannot find it. There. . . . But, *tiens!* there are no cups!”

“Curse the cups,” Riccardo cried, forgetting all patience. “*Ecco!* I will drink from the bottle. A *brindisi!*”

He took it, uncorked, from her hands, and drank a deep draught. Then he caught at the hand stretched out to his from the darkness, and flung the bottle away, half full as it was. It crashed against the stone near the entrance.

Mabrouka's arm above the wrist was free of its draperies. He kissed it, and groped at her, trembling: the fragrance of her hair and breath came to meet him like a soft, hot wind laden with spices. But it grew suddenly stifling, he fought it off.

"Thou wilt raise—raise——"

She felt his body relax, his arms grow limp. The drug had done its swift work.

Riccardo lay as he had fallen. His head had dropped into the cushion beside hers: but for his unusual stillness he might have seemed to be sleeping the profound sleep of youth. In this deathlike repose he was very lovely. She made a movement towards him that was almost motherly, and sighed.

Far away a dog barked, not at the moon, for it had dipped beneath the sea, leaving it dead. It was the signal for another to answer. All the dogs who kept the night-watch joined in; and bayed and yapped and barked again. Then the clamour died as it had begun. She stirred uneasily, slipped from his arms, bent over him and kissed his forehead, pillowing it more comfortably. Then she sat mute, regarding him for a moment, a kind of wistfulness in her gaze.

Riccardo's heavy breathing was not disturbed.

At last she rose gently; his drugged slumber was too heavy for any movement of hers to break it. Doubling the soft grass-matting over the sleeper, she stole quietly out, and let herself down without fear that the clanking of her anklets would reach him. Then she crept round to the back of the vaulting, where the improvised kitchen had been. The ashes were no longer glowing. Said sat there, huddled in his burnous, squatting on his heels against the ragged masonry

"Thou art not cold?" she said in Arabic.

"*Lâ*" (no), he replied. The monosyllable seemed to irritate her.

"I am tired to death," she went on pettishly. "How was it that thou didst not pour the drug at first, as I told thee? Allah curse thy father!"

"I thought there was a change of mind concerning the boy."

"And he, then, who waits to hear? How should I return? Now we must go home quickly. Go thou and harness the horses. We must reach Tunis before daybreak. Ismael is waiting."

The eunuch rose mutely, and went before her. The brief reign of the stars between the moon and the dawn scarcely afforded light enough to see more than a foot of the stone-strewn way. But they did not stumble. The even jingle of her anklets died away over the hillside.

Riccardo slept on.

CHAPTER IX

"MABROUKA!"

Riccardo turned sleepily, as consciousness returned to him. His head ached. He vaguely wondered what had happened to him.

"Mabrouka!" he murmured again.

But her place was empty. There was no sign of her except the matting which had been folded across him, and the silken cushions. And his throat was parched, his temples throbbing. By the entrance was a stain of red wine, scarcely dry, and some broken glass.

He threw off the matting and jumped out into the grass and sunshine. The fallen masonry baked and glistened already, and lizards darted in and out of crevices or up broken walls: some of them green as dragon-flies, others slaty-grey and warty, like miniature crocodiles, their beady eyes unblinking. Mabrouka was not visible.

He ran to the back of the masonry which had afforded them shelter during the night, but found only the charred remains of their al-fresco fire. Mabrouka had gone.

Riccardo swore, miserably. He had been drugged, tricked, left. He cursed her, fervently, abundantly, using the rich vocabulary of his race. But why? he

asked himself, puzzled. He went over the events of the night as he could remember them. What had been her reason in bringing him. Whim? If a whim she had tired of it early. Money? She had not asked him for a sou. His money! Ah! He felt his pockets, drew out his purse, counted its contents. They were intact. Not a centesimo was missing. Wait! What was it that she had said about danger . . . danger? But his head was too heavy to think, and there was a more immediate problem before him.

The warm, pungent smell of herbs greeted his nostrils. Up above in the high white sunlight was a little city, dazzlingly snowy, set on a hill, still purple with mist. That must be Sidi-bou-Said. The sea glittered evenly, like the scales of a bright beast. The horizon was grey with heat and haze, but overhead it was unfathomably blue. White butterflies blundered, errant and aimless, past him over the ruined basilica. It was evident at all events that he was still at Carthage; that Mabrouka and the carriage had disappeared; that he was due at the office in another hour, and that he had not the vaguest conception of how he should get there.

The grim humour of the situation struck him, after his first sickened anger. He laughed, and laughed again. Then he crossed the basilica, leaping from stone to stone in the difficult places until he reached the hill above. From hence he could see the panorama of swelling hills, plumed here and there with a date-palm, crowned here and there with green corn; here and there tilled, but for the most part barren with a savage and exultant nudity.

Ten minutes past seven.

He had heard that there was a station at La Marsa,

but there appeared no sign of it. Should he walk to Sidi-bou-Said, or towards the monastery of the White Fathers? The road on his left appeared to unite the two. There might be a station at Sidi-bou-Said, but, on the other hand, as he saw no European houses there probably was not. La Goletta, at the harbour's mouth, must be three or four hours away.

A thin, nasal song met his ears. Above the fluttering green of the corn on a neighbouring slope he perceived a white burnous. It was a humble *khermes*, chanting on his way to work. Riccardo crossed the road and ran up the path through the corn to meet him.

"*Holà !*"

The *khermes* stopped his walk and his song. Under his coarse white hood he was bronzed to the colour of a ripe pomegranate; he was young and comely, and his teeth showed whitely in answer to the call.

"Where is the station?" Riccardo asked in French.

The young Arab threw his head backwards.

"*Manef hömsk, sidi !*"

"Station, Carthage?" Riccardo essayed.

The man shrugged his shoulders, then pointed vaguely to the cathedral. Whether he meant to imply that the station lay in that direction, or that there they would understand, Riccardo could not tell. He turned down towards the road. The Arab resumed his way and his song.

Riccardo strode along at full speed. It could not take him long to get back to Tunis, and he might hope to reach the office without exciting undue comment, if he rushed into a hotel on the way in order to compose his raiment and shave.

Twenty minutes' hard walking brought him almost to the foot of the hill on which the cathedral of St. Louis stands, when he saw a felt hat. A European. He caught him up with a run.

"Pardon, monsieur! can you tell me the way to the railway station?"

"Follow the road down the hill, monsieur. The train goes at half-past eight. You have plenty of time."

"It reaches Tunis?"

"Between half-past nine and ten."

"But surely not? It did not take me long to drive here last night."

"The train makes a *détour*."

Riccardo shrugged his shoulders and exclaimed with vexation.

His informant, a swarthy young man of about thirty, inquired in his turn, "You do not know Carthage, then?"

"I never was here till last night. I had a fancy to see it by moonlight. I dismissed my carriage and slept the night under shelter of some brickwork. I have business in Tunis at eight."

"Excuse me, monsieur, but are you English?" the other said, with a burst of laughter.

"I am a Sicilian," Riccardo answered curtly. He was in no mood for banter.

The young man in the grey hat held out his hand impulsively. "I am a compatriot. Will you not have coffee with me? You will have plenty of time if you will allow me to take you in my automobile. I have myself to be in Tunis early this morning. I can also offer you a razor and a comb."

He extracted his card and handed it to Riccardo, who read: "Giovanni Bandini, Marchese di S. Calogero Sciacca, Palazzo S. Susanna."

Riccardo stopped and broke into an exclamation, and produced his own card.

"But we are cousins, then, or nearly cousins! My cousin Leonora Bastiagnini married your brother Giuseppe Bandini at Girgenti two years ago!"

The two young men grasped each other's hands with the effusive warmth of which Sicilians are capable, and kissed each other on both cheeks.

"How is it that you are here?" San Calogero asked.

"I am entering into a shipping business."

"And I am here on behalf of the Roman Archæological Society, aiding in some excavations by permission of the White Fathers. . . . *Holà*, Mohammed!—Excuse me, I have to speak to my man. Will you turn in and wait for me. You will find a basin and rough toilet necessities in my hut." He pointed to a wooden shanty by the roadside. "I will join you in a moment."

It was a workman's hut. Inside the open door an Arab was boiling milk in an earthenware pannikin over a small oil-stove. At Riccardo's entry he looked up, salaamed, and removed the frothy liquid, setting it down upon the floor to cool for a moment while he took two cups from a nail driven into the boarded side of the shanty, and placed it on a box by the entrance. Seeing a basin and towel on a packing-case, Riccardo made a hasty toilet. Before he had finished, the marchese reappeared, bearing an armful of smoking brioches.

"I have succeeded in waylaying the baker on his way to the monastery."

"I am not hungry, but I could swallow an ocean of drink," Riccardo answered. His aching head was already lighter, however, and his temper improved.

"Good. We need not start to the station for twenty minutes, so you will have time to drink. There is plenty of milk. This is the most fortunate thing that could have happened."

"For me, trebly fortunate," Riccardo laughed. "I find not only the station, but a relation and a breakfast."

Over the brioches the two men conversed. Riccardo told him something of his life in Tunis, of the business in which he was engaged, and of the Scarfi. San Calogero talked of his excavating work, which sometimes led him for months into places where he scarcely spoke to a living soul outside his Arab workmen.

"Are you not lonely at such times?" Riccardo asked.

San Calogero smiled. "I have my Sicilian servant, Giuseppe. Besides, I am a hermit by nature, and to me there is sufficient companionship in my work. For instance, there is plenty of romance and human fascination about this place—Carthage."

"Human?" Riccardo questioned.

"Yes, human—very human. That is where the work becomes absorbing. We come across trinkets which speak of beautiful women, or unguent-jars still containing carmine for their cheeks and lips. Only this spring we came across the sarcophagus of a girl who may have been—who knows? the petted daughter of a Hamilcar or Hanno, and her finger-rings and jewels were as bright as if she had been buried last year."

He spoke with abrupt enthusiasm. The swarthy face was lit up by its one absorbing interest.

"For days and days one digs and digs and finds nothing. Then one morning, one comes upon something that the earth has concealed for more than two thousand years and has reserved for you. The veil is lifted for you. Things which have been hidden for

two thousand years, delicate things, that have lain in the rock-tombs, emerge fresh and unblurred; chiselled signets, dancing figurines, the toys of children, amulets, even the hair of dead women. But I shall bore you. Have some more coffee?"

"I can understand," Riccardo said slowly. "It is the search for the unexpected, the concealed."

"Perhaps . . ." San Calogero sipped his coffee. "If you would care to come and see the excavations one day," he added, "I could take you over in my automobile and give you lunch."

Ciccio Scarfi was irritable and displeased. Riccardo had been absent all night, and was not at the office. The two shabby Sicilian clerks bent over the invoices they were copying with ceaselessly scratching pens Salvatore in his corner yawned and grinned alternately and wondered where Riccardo had spent the night. He surveyed his father's fidgeting with some amusement.

It was already very hot. The shutters were drawn to exclude the sun, which managed nevertheless to thrust one bright sword through to quiver and flash on the opposite wall. The scratching of the pens went on, Salvatore watched them disgustedly; the sight of industry annoyed him.

Presently the door opened and a man appeared. He was dressed a little foppishly, as if he were in easy circumstances; his morning coat was of English cloth.

Ciccio Scarfi got up and advanced to meet him.

"Ah, it is thou, my Rospigni."

"It is I, *amico mio*. I must have some words with you."

"Come into the inner office."

"Willingly."

The two disappeared.

Salvatore looked after them curiously. His father had never entrusted him with his confidence, but there was something about his relations with Rospigni which perplexed him a little. He killed a fly.

The door opened for the second time, and Riccardo entered.

Salvatore greeted him with a significant grin, and prolonged scrutiny, taking in his somewhat dejected air and the black rings under his eyes. Riccardo gave him an irritable good-morning, and asked where his uncle was.

"He is within. Tell me, Riccardo mio, this Monsieur Conradin is attractive?"

"Go to the devil!" replied Riccardo, settling to his desk and opening his correspondence.

Silence again fell on the room, except for the scratching of the pens. Salvatore yawned, "*Santo Dio!*"

"Who is with your father?" Riccardo asked at length, looking up from his letters.

"Rospigni, the superintendent of the *douane*."

"Rospigni?" Riccardo repeated.

"He is a friend of my father's."

The name was somehow familiar. Then Riccardo remembered that it was at the *douane* that he had first heard it.

He fell to work, but his mind was busy with the events of the past night and early morning. It had pleased him to meet San Calogero, and to talk of the home-country he had so lately left.

During his meditations the door of the inner office opened, and Rospigni came out, his hat in his hand. He paused to greet Salvatore.

"*Buon giorno!* You have heard the news?"

"Of your engagement to the Signorina Chiesi? Yes. Congratulations. They were talking of it at the Casino last night."

Rospigni laughed good-humouredly.

"Not that,—thanks nevertheless. Other news. Commendatore Chiesi has had me transferred to Rome. I shall be in the world once more—out of exile."

"You are fortunate, Rospigni," Salvatore said enviously. "I wish I could leave this cursed hole."

"*Ebbene*, your turn will come, *amico mio*. But I must hurry away, I have another appointment. *A riverderci!*"

He waved a farewell and left.

A few moments afterwards, Ciccio Scarfi entered the room. He walked with almost painful slowness, and Riccardo noticed that his face was more haggard than usual; his eyes more preoccupied.

Riccardo crossed over to meet him. He had anticipated some displeasure on his uncle's part at his all-night absence, but the little man looked up impatiently.

"Last night? Ah yes, yes; I remember. You were out. Left your latch-key behind you? Ah well, that is nothing."

He bent again over the papers which he held in his hands. Riccardo saw that they were shaking, and read trouble. What had passed between this man Rospigni and his uncle? In any case it had not affected Rospigni, whose manner had been debonair and cheerful.

After dinner that night, Riccardo sought out Salvatore. He was smoking—he was never seen without a cigarette between his fingers. The habit did not cost him much, excellent cigarettes are obtainable at Tunis for twopence-halfpenny the score.

"Do you feel inclined to go out to-night? Have you anything on?"

"Nothing in particular. I was going to drop in at the Casino. There's a new *comédienne* there to-night. But I don't care much where I go."

Riccardo paused. His thoughts of Mabrouka were turbulent, chaotic. He must see her to-night at all costs.

"Come with me to Ali Habib's then," he suggested casually—"where we went the other night."

"As a matter of cousinly friendship I will take you there, but I don't promise to stay with you long. You haven't fallen in love with a dancer, have you?"

"Is it likely? But I should like to see the woman Mabrouka dance again."

"Ten to one she won't be there. But I'll show you the way to the place if you'll come to the Casino with me a bit first."

"*Va bene*," Riccardo assented.

They took the tram to the brightly lit Casino, and walked to the entrance to the Jardin d'Hiver, an immense, glass-domed hall with groups of tall palms and bamboos placed in rockeries. There were a number of small marble-topped tables in the body of the hall, and at the farther end a stage, upon which a pretty, thin-legged Parisian in black and mock diamonds was shrilling the latest from the Folies Bergères. It was mostly in the slang of the Boul' Mich', and Riccardo's French was not equal to its comprehension, which was, perhaps, just as well. The place was fairly well filled, and was hazy with the smoke of cigarettes.

The two young men seated themselves, and ordered a couple of vermouths Cora, and a programme.

A tableful of French officers sat near them; exceptionally fine of physique, for these Chasseurs d'Afrique are the pick of the French army. Scarcely a man among them was under six foot, and their uniforms of white duck and scarlet added to their imposing appearance. One, a fair, broad-chested youth, bronzed with his winter shooting, leant back on his tilted chair and recounted tales of the gazelle-hunting he had had that winter in Gafsa, between huge puffs of cigar-smoke and sips at his bock. Two *cocottes* at the next table eyed them, and smoked cigarettes. At the table to Riccardo's left was a typical bourgeois family; father, mother, lanky, short-skirted child, and natty eldest daughter. The parents were of that decent stoutness characteristic of the French middle-class. Beyond them three of Riccardo's fellow-countrymen and a Maltese in shabby black clothes were making a good deal of noise; and farther on again an elderly American tourist sat with his wife and daughter, who were evidently superintending the European and African trip of the head of the family. The mother's attention and pince-nez were directed to a group of Arabs drinking absinthe near her. It was plain that all Tunis came to the Casino.

A troupe of performing dogs was the next turn. Salvatore yawned, and suggested that when Riccardo had finished his vermouth they should go into the *salle des jeux*, the door of which opened out from the Jardin d'Hiver. After the dogs the little *comédienne* was due to appear, whom Riccardo was sure to like.

Riccardo tossed off his vermouth, and followed his cousin into the adjoining room. Round its bright green baize tables, under the glare of the electric light, was a small crowd of men and women.

Salvatore pulled out a two-franc piece. "Put it on any number for me, Riccardo."

Riccardo reached over a small man's shoulder and placed the coin on the square marked 15. The croupier called out: the circle of toy horses was set in motion. Round and round it turned, gradually slackening. Riccardo watched. The foolish little horses stopped.

"*Quinze*," came the croupier's mechanical voice.

Riccardo's number had won, and Salvatore pocketed his winnings.

"*Dio!* You seem to have good fortune." He turned to speak to a friend who had tapped him on the shoulder, and Riccardo drew back. An Arab youth with a round face and a pink-and-white complexion like a girl's, dressed in white and pale green, his feet encased in a pair of high-heeled slippers of sea-green kid, was leaning over to place money on the baize. Riccardo had noticed him on his entry. He lost again and again, but imperturbably put down fresh stakes.

Riccardo came nearer. The Arab placed his francs on 19. He lost. Nineteen again. He lost. On 3. Nineteen won. There was something impish in the way that fortune eluded him. On an impulse Riccardo touched his sleeve.

"Permit me to place your stake for you—*pour vous porter bonheur*."

The Arab smiled. "I shall be much obliged, monsieur."

Riccardo took a handful of small silver from him and placed it on 13. Four was the winning number.

"Again, again," the boy pleaded. He gave Riccardo a gold piece.

Riccardo again placed it on 13.

Thirteen won.

The Arab burst into thanks, and placed a second gold piece on the table. His number was successful.

"You have changed my luck," he cried, turning to Riccardo, and went on staking eagerly.

A yellow-haired *cocotte* in a tartan skirt stood near him, her veil reaching to her powdered nose, her bare hands glittering with rings. She watched the Arab with greedy eyes, and moved close to him.

"Give me a little, *chéri*," she whispered to him, looking quickly and nervously around to see that she was not observed. Riccardo was surprised at the girl's furtive manner, as the moment before he had overheard her proffer the same request to one of her own countrymen in the most open way.

The Arab turned and regarded her under flickering lids, then pushed some money into her palm.

"More, more," she said under her breath.

He slowly dropped a few more coins into her outstretched fingers.

"Come on, Riccardo," said Salvatore behind. "It's about time for us to see that little girl."

They sauntered back, and sat down once more.

A plump, pink little hussy ran on to the stage, shaking her skirts like a kitten. The Arabs at their table stared at her with solemn eyes. Riccardo wondered what they thought of the exhibition of so much white flesh. There was no mysticism about this show; no appeal to primitive lusts: it was a light call to the passions. Looking at Mabrouka, centuries of womanhood seemed to proclaim their mysteries: looking at Simone Michaud one thought only of the indecencies of the French comic papers. Her indescribable *argot*, her bare shoulders, her *piquante* mouth and movements were as great a contrast to

Mabrouka's strange performance as the alert American girl was to the intent Arab next to her.

Riccardo's eyes strayed round the room, to those who came in or walked about. Suddenly a shriek tore the smoke-filled air; the shrill, desperate shriek of a woman. Almost every one rose to his feet, and looked towards the *salle des jeux*, from which the sound proceeded. Those nearest to the open doors poured into it, to ascertain the cause. In another moment the yellow-haired *cocotte* whom Riccardo had noticed by the tables, issued, struggling, between two officials of the Casino. She was uttering scream upon scream, and was being dragged almost bodily along. The women asked frightened questions, the men for the most part looked on amused, or returned to their bocks and absinthes.

"That's the woman I saw asking an Arab for money just now," Riccardo said to his cousin.

"Oh, that's it, is it. I heard that a surveillance was being kept on her. She probably lost her license."

"Good heavens, what for?"

"Oh, if a Frenchwoman of that class is known to have been with Arabs at all, she loses her license and is sent back. They do it, of course, as it is a paying game, but they are watched pretty carefully."

"And if a Frenchman visits an Arab woman?"

Salvatore shrugged his shoulders. "That makes no trouble for any one."

"But where is the difference?"

"The differences that make morality are arbitrary, aren't they?" Salvatore said, with the air of making an original remark.

And the shrieks of the *cocotte* died away as the little singer resumed her song.

CHAPTER X

"RICCARDO," said a voice.

Riccardo turned quickly, to see San Calogero's lean figure.

"Giovanni! You here!"

The two young men grasped each other's hands.

"I came to the Casino on the chance of finding you," San Calogero explained easily. "I thought you might follow the example of all Tunis and come here to bore yourself."

Riccardo introduced Salvatore.

Both men bowed, and uttered some trivialities.

"An unpleasant incident," San Calogero remarked, in answer to Salvatore's question as to whether he had witnessed the scene that had just taken place. "The more so because I happen to know the boy. He is to become a jurist, and the affair can do him no good with either the French or the Arabs."

"*La, la!* The Arabs!" Salvatore objected, with a shrug.

San Calogero smiled, but said nothing further.

"Won't you have a bock or an absinthe?" Riccardo asked.

"No, thanks . . . not here. I was wondering if you would join me at one of the cafés outside. I have become such a lover of the open air that I cannot stand any atmosphere like this long. But don't let

me deprive you of amusement, if you would rather stay."

"I should like nothing better," Riccardo returned, rising with alacrity.

"And you, Signor Scarfi?"

"I'll stay on, if you'll excuse me. I'm expecting friends," Salvatore answered.

Riccardo, well pleased, followed San Calogero out into the night air.

"*Dio*, how barbaric we are, after all," Giovanni said. "Take away our artificialities, and we love baubles and tinsel as much as the veriest South Sea islander. I've come to the conclusion that gentleness and æstheticism are the only true marks of civilisation."

"Judged by that standard, the Arabs are more civilised than ourselves."

"Theirs is the gentleness of children, not the gentleness of adults. As yet the Arab is a child. The nation is yet to appear in the East which will be the gentle adult."

"What of Japan?"

"Ah, what of it! That is stupendous, marvellous. But the test of temperament has yet to come. Will Japan retain her gentleness and her æstheticism when she has held herself in rank with Western powers for centuries? Her art has already become polluted."

"Monsieur Conradin, with whom I was dining yesterday, sees a future for the Arabs," Riccardo said, searching his cousin's face to see if the name had any significance for him.

"Conradin? I don't know him. There may be a future, but I doubt it. The West has assumed the proportions of Destiny to the Arab, and Destiny he may not fight."

"Cannot this slavery to Destiny be eradicated, then?"

"It takes a new religion to do that. It is possible that Babism may in time reach Africa, and supplant Mohammedanism. Babism may yet reconstruct the East. It is spreading rapidly. Persia will soon be permeated by it; it has converts all over Syria."

"Babism? What is that?"

"It is the newest of old religions," Giovanni said, with a smile.

"A new religion?"

"Yes, and one of the most romantic. You know that *Bab* means a gate. Well, during the last century, a youth, saintly, semi-divine, gave himself out as the Bab; the Gate through which a new revelation was to flow to all nations. 'I am the Bab,' he said. His religion was tolerant, spiritual, philosophical. His adherents increased, the Babi sect became numerous. The Government began to suspect it of political designs; fanatics cursed it as heretical. The Bab gave out that one should come after him who should be mightier than himself. He claimed no divinity; only divine inspiration. He was taken at last by the Government, condemned to death, stripped, humiliated, exposed to the people. His youth and beauty were remarkable; in his nakedness he looked divine. There was tumult among the people; some thought that a god was about to be sacrificed; others, a dangerous heretic. He was suspended by the wrists; a line of soldiers was ordered to fire. They fired. When the smoke had cleared, there was nobody riddled with shots. The Bab had disappeared. The crowd was breathless. There were shouts of 'A miracle, a miracle!' But the Bab was human after all, and

what had happened was that by some strange chance the cords which bound his wrists had been shot through, and he had fallen unscathed. The crowd parted to let him escape, and the end of the drama was pitiful enough; they found him hiding in a shop in the city, and despatched him with their knives."

"Well?"

"Well, after that the sect was subjected to a virulent persecution. They were chased out of house and home. Like the early Christians, they counted loss as gain, and seemed possessed by a spirit of exaltation. The question then arose as to upon whom the mantle of the Bab had fallen. There were rival factions. The sordid always follows pretty quickly at the heels of the divine. However, one of the rival Babs ceded to the other eventually, and the present Bab, Abbas Effendi, is a most curious personality. His magnetism is marvellous; his gentleness and charity are undenied even by his enemies. He is the author of one of the most extraordinary religious philosophies which have ever come from East or West."

"You met him, then?"

"Yes; I saw him once only. A dignified old dreamer, a person who impressed me uncannily. There is only one other person who has ever given me the same odd feeling of magnetism, and that, funnily enough, is a man with whom I was discussing Babism only a day or two ago, Si Ismael. You have heard of him? A mine of knowledge upon Oriental subjects. He has a library——"

"Si Ismael," interrupted Riccardo eagerly. "You know him?"

"Since two years. An able man and a born archæologist. I was about to tell you about his

library. He has a valuable collection of Arab and Persian books. So valuable that national museums have several times approached him in vain."

But Riccardo was not listening. From Si Ismael his thoughts had flown to Mabrouka.

"Where shall we have coffee?" he asked. "Could we not go to a native café?"

"By all means. Let it be in the Halfaouine square. Its cafés have such delightful names."

"I know of a dancing café," Riccardo began quickly.

"Forgive me, I haven't the energy. The eternal *danse du ventre*? The sight of those human hippopotami interferes with my appetite. Which café was it? The one opposite the English church?"

"The name was Abib."

"Probably a Jew."

Riccardo stood irresolute, not wishing to explain his desire to go at any cost. But, on the other hand, Mabrouka might not be dancing. And if his anger against her had cooled a little, his desire to find a reason for her behaviour had grown.

"Come along, my dear fellow, you can see that interesting performance any night."

Riccardo gave in. Before they had moved a few steps, Giovanni stopped with vexation.

"*Peste*, it's raining!"

Some big drops were actually falling: one of the sudden rainstorms blown from the hills was imminent. In a moment the pavements were lashed with a steady downpour. Passing Arabs pulled up the hoods of their burnouses, looking like gigantic horned moths as they passed in and out of the misty, illuminated radius caused by the big electric light. The two young men gained the shelter of the arcade. It was a dreary outlook.

The electric tram went buzzing past, full of light and crowded with passengers of every nation; but the streets emptied as if by magic.

"You had better come back with me," Riccardo suggested. "I should like to present you to my cousins."

"I have an appointment soon, and it is growing late."

"It is only half-past nine. Come in for a little while, it is not far, and we are bound to get wet in any case."

"Well, let us make the attempt, then," Giovanni said. "Tell me, are your cousins as pretty as their mother? Giovanna Bastiagnini, my mother used to say, was a beauty in her day."

"So I have heard," Riccardo replied, as they plunged once more into the rain. "They are good-looking enough. Annunziata, the younger, is perhaps the prettier of the two. Gioconda is more serious, and handsome in her way."

"And you are still heart-whole?"

"Perfectly."

He wondered, as he replied, if San Calogero were as cold of temperament as his manner suggested. One of the first maxims held by a Sicilian is that a woman, in some shape or form, is a necessity to every man's existence. It is never pre-supposed that he is a celibate, as in northern countries. San Calogero must have a mistress, of course. Of what nationality Riccardo was unable to guess.

They had reached the house in the Medersa-es-Slimania, and a bang at the door with the heavy iron ring brought Achmed to their rescue. They stepped into welcome shelter, and, divesting themselves of their damp overcoats, passed under the colonnade upstairs to the first floor.

Ciccio Scarfi and his two daughters were in the

salone, and Riccardo led the way thither. At their entry Ciccio glanced up with the sudden look of suspicion that Riccardo had surprised so many times. Upon the introduction, however, Ciccio appeared to regard the young Sicilian with friendliness.

Riccardo felt proud of Gioconda, who inherited her mother's easy, aristocratic manners, and showed quick interest in the archæologist's work, asking him questions about the recent discovery of rock-tombs at Carthage with an intelligence which surprised both young men. Annunziata listened with dainty laziness, professing entire ignorance of such matters. So Riccardo left Gioconda and Giovanni to their conversation, and settled himself beside his younger cousin, to exchange teasing remarks with her.

Giovanni soon rose to go, pleading his appointment.

"But you are not going back to Carthage?" Ciccio Scarfi said.

"No; I have engaged a room at the Hotel de Paris. I shall motor back early to-morrow."

"That is too bad. Another time, please remember that there is a bedroom always ready for your use here," Ciccio remarked, turning to his eldest daughter to confirm what he had said.

She endorsed her father's remark with pretty hospitality.

"I shall take you at your word," Giovanni replied flushing a little, as he shook hands with the two young girls. He meant it. It was long since he had talked to women of his own class and nation, particularly to a woman able to converse with him on equal terms.

After he had gone, the girls chattered together, Ciccio Scarfi yawned, and Riccardo fell to thinking. Last night he had been with Mabrouka, and he felt an

insane desire for her presence again. He remembered how he had kissed her hands in the darkness of the carriage on their way to Carthage—soft hands, fragrant hands; how he had listened to her broken talk, to that lisping contralto voice of hers.

Surely she was not as the other dancers. Why, then? He had not been mistaken in thinking her tender: he was no novice to be tricked by an elaborate drama. And she had taken no money. The pain of unfulfilled instinct racked him, a warm madness crept into his veins. Why had she drugged him? why had she escaped? Could it have been Said, after all? If she had not desired him, what reason had she for entertaining him? Had she lied when she called herself a dancer? No, for he had seen her dance.

Every one was saying good-night. Riccardo started from his preoccupation. Annunziata was giving him his lighted candle.

He went to his bedroom, where the ivory Christ above the bed flickered in the uncertain candlelight. The sirocco wailed around the patio like a lost soul. Somehow the wavering shadows on the pale limbs of the Redeemer reminded him of Mabrouka's shuddering body. His lips burned as he kissed the crucifix and murmured an "Ave." Then he went hurriedly to his writing-table and scribbled in French: "Come to me. I must speak with you. RICCARDO." He placed it into an envelope, sealed it, and addressed it in a feigned hand to "Mabrouka: Chez Ali Habib, 3 Rue des Montagnes." Placing it where his hand would fall on it the first thing next morning, he undressed, blew out the candle, and got into bed. Holding her clasped in his empty arms, he fell asleep with a dream of her presence. "Mabrouka! *adorée* . . ."

CHAPTER XI

BUT San Calogero's appointment did not lead him towards the French quarter, as he had implied to Riccardo. It led him instead through the dark wet streets of the Arab quarter, skirting the Hara, and the oldest quarter of the town. After a quarter of an hour's walking he reached a street which was slightly wider than its sisters, though, like them, it was partly covered in. It burrowed its way under silent houses, which spanned the vaulting. Andalusian windows, heavily grilled, broke the monotony of the walls, and showed that these houses had been built by Andalusian Moors in the past centuries. Under one of these archways San Calogero came to a stop before a small blue door, and inserting a key into the old-fashioned lock, he opened it, closing it again behind him. Ascending the staircase, illuminated by a smoky oil-lamp, he entered a vast room, in which a single candle flickered, its flame incapable of illuminating more than a small area of the gloom.

A bed, heavily gilt, in the alcove of the wall, was the principal object of the room, which was sparsely, almost poorly, furnished. Beside it a woman crouched, her head hidden.

At San Calogero's entry she looked up, and got quickly to her feet with a gesture of respect and greeting.

"Hush, hush!" she whispered. "*Bishwoya!* She sleeps."

"She is better?" he questioned anxiously, under his breath.

"Since sunset, after thy departure, she has slept."

San Calogero crept over to the bed noiselessly.

The hump under the coverlet was so slight, so small, that his heart ached. As if his mere presence had brought a disquieting influence, however, the still figure shuddered and stirred. Two thin arms were lifted from beneath the coverlet.

He bent quickly over her.

"Douja, my little soul, I have awakened thee. How can I forgive myself!"

He kissed the white child's face which lay on the pillow. The sick girl's black eyes, unnaturally large, closed contentedly as he took the thin body in his embrace; and he passed his lips over the shut lids.

"My lord, my sultan; if thou wert near I should know even if I were dead."

She clung to him with her little strength, as if to touch him gave her life.

He stroked her temples.

"Thou art cooler. The fever seems to have left thee," he returned after a moment, releasing her tenderly, and gathering her wasted hands into his own.

"Yes, the burning has gone. Thou hast wrought the miracle. The medicine that the Frank doctor gave me was of no avail until I saw thee again. I only live when thou art near me."

He addressed the elderly woman who stood by the bed. "Has the doctor been again since I left?"

"Not again, sidi," she returned sullenly. "He promised to visit her in the early morning."

"That sounds like an improvement," San Calogero said. But the elder woman's eyes burst into a sudden flame.

"Of what good if he comes?" she uttered in a low, ferocious voice. "Of the nights he knows nothing. He will kill her."

San Calogero made an impatient movement.

"Peace, woman! We have had this talk before."

She flung herself at his feet, and seized his hand.

"Sidi, sidi! have pity. He is foolish, and an infidel. What does a Frank know of these things? I tell you the girl is possessed with a djinn. How shouldest thou understand—thou, an unbeliever! It is truth that I speak; Allah knows that it is the truth. Have I not stayed beside her night after night, and heard the djinn speaking through her mouth and rending her with agony as he goes. What does the Frank know of such things? How can minerals and bitter waters cure the soul? What does he know of exorcism, or of the use of magic herbs? . . . The girl will die! the girl will die!"

She burst into a storm of sobbing.

The sick girl looked distressed.

"Pardon her, sidi. I have spoken and reasoned with her an hundred times," she said, as though in apology. "Thou knowest, Giovanni, that I take all the medicines that the Frank gives me, because it is thy wish and I am obedient. To know that I find favour with thee is better than health."

"I have told thee that this talk about djinns is foolishness," San Calogero said gently, kissing her thin fingers. "Have I ever told thee a lie, dear one?"

She hesitated. "Yes, I know that thou art wise, but——"

"But what——" he questioned, with a slight loss of patience.

"If only I might try—the other," she said hurriedly, timidly, under her breath. "I want to be well. I want to be well for thy sake. Of what good to a man is a sick mistress? Thou wilt need another woman, and my heart will wither within me, and I shall die."

"Thou art better already, my soul," he argued, with forced cheerfulness, caressing her cheeks. "In a few weeks thou wilt be gay and fat and well."

She was silent. Great tears welled out under her closed eyes and fell slowly on to the pillow.

He looked at her in desperation.

"Tell me, little one," he said, speaking on impulse. "Would it please thee to see an Arab doctor?"

"If I might, if I might!" she breathed fearfully, opening wide, wet black eyes to his.

He reflected. Her tranquillity of mind was important, and the distress she was causing herself likely to undo all the good wrought by the French doctor's treatment.

He turned to the other woman, who sat with her face buried in her hands.

"Fatoum, *id* Fatoum!"

The woman lifted her head.

"Thou knowest an Arab physician—a *hakim*?" he asked.

"Yes, sidi." Her eyes were eager.

"Then fetch one as soon as it is possible."

He would at least be present when the man arrived.

A half-frightened look appeared on the face of the sick girl.

"Thou art not displeased with me?"

"Why should I be displeased? Have I ever shown anger to thee, my little soul?"

A smile danced into her sunken eyes.

"*Hamdullah!* that is true. . . . Lay thy head beside mine on the pillow. My heart is full of happiness."

"Is it not time for thy milk?"

She gave him a look of love. He took the pitcher from Fatoum's hands, and filled the glass by her bedside, adding a little brandy from a flask. She made a wry grimace when he supported her to a sitting position and held the glass to her lips.

"I had sooner it were poison," she said with weak gaiety, adding a pious "*Bismillah!*" as, with a final grimace, she gulped it down.

The effort seemed to exhaust her, and for a moment she gasped painfully for breath. The elder woman, shrouded in her haik, had already left the room.

Her breathing became heavier and less regular, but she lay in a state of coma that was half stupor, half sleep. He watched her intently, as a mother watches a sleeping child. An hour slipped by. There had been no sound or stir in the room. He had not dared to move for fear of disturbing her. Presently the candle, burnt to the socket, flared and sputtered and went out.

They were in darkness. He listened anxiously for the sound of an opening door below, but there was no sound but Douja's heavy breathing in the vast emptiness of the room.

Suddenly she began to speak, in a soft, unnatural voice. He bent over her, thinking she had called him, but she struck at him with burning hot hands, and made a noise in her throat. He realised that this babbling was delirium, and sat patiently waiting in the

darkness. The babbling continued, sibilant and high and strange. He only caught a word here and there. Once she cried out that the leathern bag was stifling her. Then he caught the words, "Bite, bite, bite," in quick succession. His knowledge of Arabic was not perfect enough to enable him to understand much. There was something uncanny to him in hearing this high, strange voice in the darkness. It seemed as if another element had entered into the room, a malignant, half-intelligent force like that of a hostile maniac. At times the voice stopped uttering words, and changed into a sound that was hardly human; a hissing, rattling sound that nevertheless conveyed a kind of intelligence, and was in some degree an expression of volition and emotion. From what part of her fevered brain it originated he could not guess. At times there were silences, but silences so pregnant, so diseased, so malevolent, that he felt himself shuddering. He understood now what Fatoum had meant when she talked about a djinn. There was something abnormal about this delirium, that, had he been superstitious, would have reduced him to—— But, pah! the idea was absurd.

He wondered if he could soothe her by smoothing her brow. His hands were a little clammy, it was true, but they were cold. He moved a little nearer to the bed, but drew back in an unexpected repugnance to touch her. It was not Douja, this whispering, whinnying thing in the darkness. God! what was it then?

He pulled himself abruptly together. What a fool he was to let a fancy like this influence him. . . . A sick girl, in a fever. . . . It was, perhaps, that he was unaccustomed to illness. . . . Still, he could not bring himself to touch her. If only he could smoke. But he had no cigarettes left.

Another of those terrible silences fell. He cursed his nerves. How was it that he, accustomed to the great emptiness and loneliness of desert nights, the stillness of dead cities, could be affected by a dark room and a sick girl. He tried to force his mind elsewhere, to think of Riccardo Bastiagnini, of the new rock-tombs at Carthage which had only that week come to light; but his brain refused to obey him, as a trembling horse refuses to leap into a fire at its master's rein and spur. His entire being was dominated by something else, something inexplicable, something horrible. He wondered how many hours had gone by since Fatoum had left him. In God's name, how long would it be before she returned?

The silence was longer than usual. He could bear it no more. He remembered that there was a box of matches in his pocket. If he were to strike one he might be able to discover another candle and light it. With a shaking hand he felt for them. The first match failed to ignite, and he threw it away. The second gave a feeble flare. He looked hastily towards the bed. Douja had thrown off the coverlet, and was lying flat upon her stomach on the high bed, her position giving her head a curiously flattened appearance. Her face was close to his own, her eyes, scarcely open, were two burning slits in her white face. The lips were drawn back to show the teeth. The odd thing was that although she held herself so still, so terribly still, her position suggested an unnatural tenseness which gave her the crouching, waiting look of a tigress about to spring, or a serpent ready to strike. The match burnt his fingers, and he threw it down, moving, as he did so, abruptly away from the bed. The pall of darkness had fallen again. What wonder if people worshipped fire

and light as the dispellers of evil when so little a thing as a burning match had power to alleviate the terror that walketh by night.

After a while he heard a new sound, the sound of a body sliding. She was sliding, sliding stealthily to the floor; not falling or descending by ordinary means. A sudden horror froze him. He heard the sound of naked flesh, rustling, gliding along the matting by his feet. With an effort of his will he reached again for the box of matches, and lit a second match. He saw the white, thin body of a woman, Douja's body, moving sinuously over the floor, with the head laid flat so that all the neck touched the ground; propelling itself swiftly and bonelessly with the furtive, jerking movements of a reptile.

"Douja!" came from his lips hoarsely.

Yet he had the consciousness that it was not Douja. He made a frantic appeal to his reason, to his will. The match, crackling as it burnt into the flesh of his finger and thumb, helped to restore him. He rushed forward, bent to grasp at the elusive thing worming its way along on the floor, and put his arms around it. At the same time he heard the sound of a door below.

Douja's body contorted in his arms. It was very cold. He wondered at the strength of her. She struck at him with her head, hissing as she did so in her throat. An instinct of self-preservation made him shield his neck before her second attack. Footsteps came up the stairs.

Her body was still contorting wildly, with flapping, unnatural movements. Suddenly he felt her teeth in his gullet, as with a great effort he reached the bed with his burden, and for the first time since their struggle she screamed, the high scream of a terrified animal.

Again and again she shrieked. He still kept his arms tightly round her as he laid her on the bed. But a new access of strength convulsed her, and she wrenched herself away from him. A prolonged wail burst from her lips, a sound different from those she had uttered hitherto—a frightened, human sound.

Giovanni experienced an inexplicable relief, and just as the door opened, and a light broke into the room, he staggered back from the bedside.

Fatoum held the oil-lamp in her hand. The man who walked behind her was—good heavens! “It is you, Si Ismael,” he said, advancing unsteadily to meet him. “I didn’t know——” Words failed him; he sobbed; he fell to the ground. Fatoum, holding the lamp high over her head, went to the bedside, and turned over the naked body which lay there face downward. The eyes she looked into were glazed; foam was still upon the mouth. There was no movement.

“It is too late,” she said, without betraying any emotion. She unclenched the hands gently, and straightened the limbs, then spread the coverlet over the dead girl.

Si Ismael bent over Giovanni’s unconscious figure, and with rapid fingers loosened his clothing, uncovering the bleeding mark in his throat.

“I will make myself responsible for this man,” he said curtly. “I know him. What had he to do with thee and her?”

“Douja, the girl, was my niece. She was given in marriage to a travelling merchant at Gafsa. She was little and delicate, and only twelve. He ill-treated her. The sidi, beside whom we camped one night, heard the girl sobbing, and because she had become diseased the

merchant parted with her for the dowry which the sidi paid. She recovered for a little while, and then the djinn entered her and brought her into a sickness. The sidi engaged a Frank *hakim* . . ." She choked, unable to speak.

Si Ismael was winding a strip of his turban round Giovanni's throat.

"I will take him in my carriage," he said. "There is poison in the wound, and if the antidote is not applied quickly he will die. Hast thou money to bury the girl?"

She shook her head, her tongue dried.

Si Ismael drew out his purse and handed it to her and then, raising the Sicilian's limp figure in his arms, he passed out.

CHAPTER XII

GIOCONDA was brushing her hair out before the mirror. Her thoughts were busy with the trivial cares of the day, and chiefly with the necessity for fresh muslin curtains in her father's room, since the others had been badly torn in the wash. As she calculated what she would have to pay for them in the Magasin General, where there was a "Rabat" that week, her rapid fingers rolled the long tresses into curls and pinned them over her well-shaped head with mathematical neatness. She was not one of those women who leave the dressing of their hair to a lesiured moment after morning coffee, and begin the day in a *peignoir*; and she had the habit of rising an hour before the rest of the household. In that hour she usually contrived to do more than most of her country-women would have accomplished in a morning—for Sicilian women are inclined to dawdle over the day.

"Signorina, signorina!"

She went hastily to the door.

"What is it, Concetta?"

The old woman came in, excited.

"The signore who was here last night, the *signor marchese*—he is below, ill, dying; with an Arab."

"Below, where?" Gioconda repeated, her brain unable to grasp the facts at first.

"In a carriage, signorina."

The girl threw on a dressing-jacket and followed Concetta down the stairs. She was confronted in the courtyard by a tall, dignified personage in Arab dress.

"Si Ismael!" she exclaimed, surprised past further speech.

"The Marchese di San Calogero is in my carriage," he said in explanation, speaking in French. "He paused to see a snake-charmer last night, and one of the reptiles escaped and bit him. I happened to be passing in my carriage at the time, and took him to my house to apply the necessary antidotes. But the wound is still in a critical state: he should be carefully nursed. He mentioned your cousin's name several times during a period of semi-consciousness, so I thought it best to bring him here instead of taking him to the hospital. Unfortunately I am leaving Tunis for several days, or I should have been pleased——"

He hesitated.

"You did rightly," Gioconda answered quickly. "I will have him carried upstairs immediately."

She superintended the removal of the unconscious man from the carriage to her own bedroom, which was for the moment the only one prepared for use.

"I have left a message with a French doctor," Si Ismael said, as she returned to him in the courtyard. "He should be here within a few minutes. Meantime you need not be alarmed. I have applied an antidote. It is the effects of the drug which cause the present unconsciousness. He will sleep it off in time."

He bowed formally and turned to go. Gioconda watched him into the closed carriage with a dazed feeling; then went upstairs to tend the sleeping man.

Giovanni's illness for the time usurped the attention

of every one in the house. For the first few days he had periods of delirium, followed by long hours in which he lay in absolute stupor, scarcely breathing. Riccardo relieved Gioconda at times of the arduous sick-room duty, during the time when the fever was at its highest. The wound in Giovanni's neck, and the symptoms which accompanied his sickness, frankly puzzled the doctor. He inclined to the belief that a dog or rodent had inflicted the bite, and refused to think that it could have been caused by a snake. He had studied the question of native antidotes, and affirmed to Riccardo that the Arab knowledge of poisons in some districts was astonishingly wide, and probably descended by tradition from the science of an older civilisation. As soon as Giovanni was better, he questioned him about the circumstances; but found his patient reticent.

Giovanni grew better by degrees; the wound healed, and he came at last into a pleasant state of convalescence, during which he found it possible to banish the past as he would banish a nightmare from waking thought. In his own mind the experience of that night seemed a dream of horror in which he was unable to dissociate reality from illusion. Of the dead child—she was hardly more—whom he had rescued for a short time from the tangible terrors of a sordid existence, only to see her replunged into the worse terrors which he could not comprehend, he could hardly bear to think. The present was embodied agreeably in the cool-fingered, capable girl who administered his medicines, changed the dressings on his neck, kept the flowers by his bedside fresh, and talked to him gently of everyday things in an everyday voice. It pleased him, too, to see Annunziata, with her childish

loveliness and the gay ways which she subdued in his sick-room, and to talk to Riccardo Bastiagnini. Ciccio Scarfi, taciturn and harassed-looking, came in daily, and Salvatore was solicitous on his behalf.

Riccardo, meanwhile, had gone twice to the hidden café in the Rue des Montagnes, without result. His appeal to the dancer had brought no response, and he had watched with increasing impatience the gyrating and heaving of the fat Jewesses. But he had neither succeeded in making himself understood when he asked for her, nor in discovering the least trace of her. A heavy subsidy had been placed in the well-manicured hands of Ali Habib at each successive visit, together with missives in French addressed to Mabrouka, but they were not more productive of result than the epistle he had sent through the post. It was possible that she could not read. He was maddened by the fact that although the woman knew where he lived, she had given him no sign. He had never had to sue long for favours, thanks to his good looks and his youth. Her trickery of him seemed purposeless, and because he was unable to understand, this one woman, a native courtesan, became enhanced with a fictitious value. She became to him the *Fata Morgana*, beckoning and elusive. Whereas if he had gained her, *chi lo sa?* the spell might have vanished with the mystery.

The morning following his second fruitless visit to the Rue des Montagnes, an inspiration came into his mind as he lay between waking and sleeping in his bed. The clattering of housework in the patio had roused him earlier than usual. Concetta was screaming to Marietta, the servant-girl, the length of the courtyard in angry Sicilian, and the sun was blindingly white on the patch of wall above his head. The idea that

occurred to him was so obvious that he was amazed that it had not penetrated his mind before. Si Ismael, or Conradin if he preferred the name, had been the means of his seeing Mabrouka. It was on his doorstep that he had first spoken to the woman, and it was to his servant that she had delivered something. Therefore the necessary information as to her whereabouts could be, with diplomacy, extracted from Si Ismael himself. It was worth trying in any case. He had resolved to track her down. His hunting instinct as well as his vanity had been touched.

He hummed a Neapolitan song, and after sousing in a cold bath *à l'anglaise*, he went out into the patio to sun himself before morning coffee. He felt the glow of superb health and young manhood, and was Southern enough to recognise its physical origin. The sadness which underlies the *joie de vivre* of the extreme South is due to this realisation of the fleetingness of things; to the knowledge that the hour in the sun must be followed by the long darkness. Achmed was cleaning the boots of the infidel.

"*Narek mabrouk*," he smiled in the vernacular (a fortunate morning).

"*Narek mabrouk*," Riccardo returned, offering him a cigarette. He usually carried a case although he seldom smoked. Achmed ceased from the defiling work of cleaning infidel boots, and lit it. An Arab never refuses the offer of a smoke, except during Ramadan.

"Best thanks, monsieur; a fortunate day to you."

"I need good luck," Riccardo said carelessly.

"It is I who bring the good luck to this house," Achmed went on, with the air of a benefactor. "I have a brother who is *mahaboul*, and in the favour of Allah." He spoke with a kind of reverent pride

in his half-witted brother. "And he is not the first in our family, monsieur; my great-grandfather was also a holy man, he has a *marabout*¹ two kilometres from Tunis. My mother goes there every Friday to leave candles." He sent up a long column of smoke and gave the boot he held a vigorous rubbing.

"Speaking of marabouts," Riccardo began in a casual manner, "tell me of this Si Ismael of whom I hear so much."

Achmed looked up with a start.

"Si Ismael?" he repeated. "*Wallah!*" he added after a moment's reflection, "that is indeed a great man, and a holy."

"By what particular piece of holiness has he distinguished himself?" Riccardo questioned.

"He is a marabout of the Rahmánya," Achmed replied in non-committal tones, again fixing his attention upon the boot which he was polishing. "I know nothing of him, except that he is a powerful man."

Riccardo strolled away whistling "*Ci sira*," and then checked himself as he saw his youngest cousin at the opening into the second patio.

"Riccardo," she called in the Sicilian dialect. "*Veni cha!*"

He went to her.

"I'm feeding my flamingoes," she said, "and Yasoda won't eat. I wish you would see what is the matter with her." Riccardo followed her to the corner in which the flamingoes were penned. One stood with ruffled pink-and-white feathers on one leg apart from the others, its long neck huddling into the body, a dishevelled and sick-looking object.

Riccardo examined it. "It looks ill."

¹ The term "marabout" applies equally to a holy man or his tomb.

"Of course it does. But what shall I do?"

"Why don't you try giving it a morning's liberation?" he suggested. "Let it wander about the patio. It can't get away, and it will be best to keep it from the others."

"It is always discontented," Annunziata said, as she shooed it out and refastened the hurdle and matting. "It is always trying to fly; and it pecks the others. It is funny too, because I had it when it was quite young."

The sick flamingo hopped languidly away, and became a ruffled ball in a sunny corner.

"Perhaps it has nostalgia," suggested Riccardo. "Perhaps it is in love with the sky that you will never let it reach. It may remember the tales it heard of the hordes that fly to Egypt in the cold months, wing to wing, with nothing between themselves and the sun, nothing between themselves and the sea."

"Do you think so?" Annunziata said reflectively, as they went together towards the house. "I will let its wings grow and see."

"It might find itself *déclassée* if you gave it its freedom. It will go gladly—but the other birds will look on it as an alien, a foreigner. It will be disappointed. It will perhaps be pecked to death by the flock."

"Then I had better not?"

"It has a nature which must always suffer," Riccardo said, and looked, laughing, into Annunziata's serious eyes. "It's only a bird, after all."

"*Evvero!*" Annunziata smiled; "it's only a bird. . . . Oh, Riccardo, I forgot, I came out to give you a letter which came this morning. Seeing Yasoda so ill made me forget."

He glanced at the envelope—of thin, cheap paper,

slipped it into his pocket, and asked for news of Giovanni.

"He has passed a good night. The fever has left him completely."

"I shall go in to see him after I have drunk coffee," Riccardo answered.

He was inwardly eager to devour the contents of the letter, which he did not question was the answer from Mabrouka which he had expected so long. The address was carefully, childishly written, as if by a scribe unaccustomed to forming the Roman characters. Perhaps she had employed one of the letter-writers in the souks. As soon as he had an opportunity, he opened it and perused it.

"DEAR FRIEND" (he read),—"I love thee, but cannot see thee.
MABROUKA."

Riccardo crammed this concise epistle into his coat pocket. No woman, or man either, ever yet found it impossible to see a lover, if the desire were strong enough. It was plain that the dancer was occupied with other suitors. It had been her whim to entertain him for a night, and with the gratification of the whim further desire to see him had disappeared. He blamed himself for letting this outcast occupy so much of his thought or employ so much of his imagination. Yet, at the same time, he did not relinquish his intention of extracting information about her from Si Ismael.

Giovanni was dressed when Riccardo entered his room, and deep in the columns of the *Dépêche Tunisienne*.

In answer to Riccardo's exclamation of surprise at seeing the invalid in his clothes, Giovanni laughed.

"I should have been up long ago if it had not been for Gioconda's sick-room tyranny, and the aiding and abetting of monsieur, the doctor. This night fever is simply a return of malaria which I have had all my life—a mere nothing. Besides, I must get back to work soon. I have had news from Carthage that there is to be an expedition to the south, to El-Hathera, a village near Kairouan, where chance has discovered a temple, or what they hope is a temple."

His eyes shone in his pale face.

"You and your cousins have been very good to me," he added simply. "I feel that I can never repay all this kindness to me—a mere stranger."

"A stranger—when we are almost of the same blood!"

"It is true that I feel myself adopted," Giovanni smiled.

"Then you will leave us?"

"With the permission of this rogue of a doctor. The air at Kairouan at this season is dry and good, and I am best in the open."

"You should marry a Bedouin woman and live in the black tents," Riccardo said, laughing.

"The black tents tempt me often—but not the prospect of a wife."

"*Ma che!* What foolishness is this, *amico mio!* Thou wilt need a wife some day."

Giovanni made a half-humorous gesture. "I have no especial need of women. I devote myself to a mistress who never changes and yet is ever-changing. Like myself, she has outlived her first passions—this treasure-concealing earth of ours."

"This is sick man's talk. Wait till the blood goes coursing quickly through your veins again—you will find such a mistress lacking in response," Riccardo replied. He had surmised that all was not well with his kinsman in this direction, and attributed his melancholy to this cause. For when he had relieved Gioconda at the night-watch by the sick man's bed during the period of his delirium, he had heard Giovanni more than once babble a woman's name, together with much indistinct Arabic; and once he had screamed out that the woman was possessed, and that if she kissed his throat he would die. That Gioconda had also overheard fever-talk of this kind he did not doubt, but said nothing to her of the matter. It was none of his business.

Before he went on his way to the office, Gioconda called him secretly aside into the *salone*, which was empty.

"Riccardo," she said, "I am worried about my father. He has looked ill for a long time, but lately it has grown much worse. Little things upset him. Do you know that when I told him that Si Ismael had brought Giovanni here that first day, he glared at me like a maniac. It was not that he disliked Giovanni being here, for he has always been concerned about him ever since."

"I have seen," Riccardo replied, "that his nerves are not in good condition." He did not wish to alarm Gioconda.

"Then you have noticed too," she went on hurriedly. "That is just it. He starts, and listens, and dislikes being alone. If I did not know that he could have nothing to be afraid of I should say that he was——" She broke off.

"I know."

"I have not said a word to any of the others," Gioconda continued. "Only—if anything is frightening—" she checked herself, and then repeated the word deliberately,—*"frightening him, you might be able to discover it. . . . Do you know, Riccardo, I know that he has a motive in asking you here. He has an anxiety upon his mind that he will not share with any one. Salvatore is not altogether trustworthy, and—but you will think it foolish of me to have all these fancies. It is only that I cannot bear to see him so unlike himself."* Her voice faltered.

"You—you know of no cause?"

"I know of no cause," she answered. "The business, he says, is more prosperous than it has been for years . . ."

He kissed her hand. "I will do what I can," he promised her. "It may simply be that he needs a rest, after all. There is no need for you to worry yourself by thinking of possible causes for his depression."

But as he went away, he found somewhat to ponder over in the fact that Ciccio Scarfi had shown emotion on hearing that Si Ismael had come to the house. Si Ismael, and always Si Ismael! This man seemed to bear up against him at every turn.

When he arrived home that night, it was discovered as every one sat down to dinner, the invalid among them, that Annunziata was absent. Where was she? No one knew. They called to her in vain. But a sudden thought made Riccardo remember the sick flamingo—she was probably tending it. He went down to see, and found her, as he had expected, in the second patio, bending over the bird.

"Come, Annunziata mia, dinner's ready."

She did not reply, and he went over to her.

"How's the patient?"

She lifted a tear-stained face to him.

"Oh, Riccardo! It's dead."

He put a consoling arm about her. "Never mind I'll buy you another myself."

"But it was so unhappy—and I never cared," she said, with a sob. "I am sorry now I didn't let it go."

"Cheer up, *caridda*. If birds have souls, it's probably flying away now—off to Egypt."

"Do you really think so?"

"Why not? The Madonna herself loved birds."

"I hope the other spirit-birds won't peck at it!" she ejaculated, smiling through her tears.

His imagination failed him. "Why should they?" he answered lamely.

She stroked the feathers and lifted the limp pink neck.

"*La poverina!*" she murmured, crying afresh.

"I tell you, I have an idea!" Riccardo said, with an inspiration. "To-morrow we'll move the rest to a place where they can see the sky. There's the terrace, isn't there?"

"Yes," she answered tragically, "but there is no tank."

But the idea evidently cheered her. "Perhaps papa will allow us to have one made up there," she added.

They laid the dead bird under a piece of matting, and placed it in an empty packing-case for the night, and then Riccardo persuaded Annunziata to come upstairs.

His heart was heavy—he knew not why.

After all, it was only a captive bird that was dead, and Annunziata was laughing already.

CHAPTER XIII

RICCARDO wrote a diplomatic note to Conradin, resolved to keep in touch with him, to watch him if necessary. There was a double reason for his doing so. Whatever his relations with Mabrouka, Si Ismael alone was in touch with the woman, and through him Riccardo might again get at her whereabouts. He was tired of scanning the closely veiled figures that he passed daily, their eyes could tell him nothing: for him Mabrouka was only a veil, a voice, a form, a spirit. He had haunted the Rue des Montagnes in vain. Secondly, he was minded to discover what was Si Ismael's reason for adopting a pseudonym with him, an insignificant stranger.

He wrote to ask Conradin to dine with him at the Tunisia-Palace, the most expensive hotel in Tunis, but where there was music and a sufficient number of the better class of foreigners. Conradin wrote back—

"I regret that I am confined to the house at present by the inflammation of an old wound. But if you would take pity on my solitude and take dinner with me here again to-night, I should be indebted to you."

Riccardo accepted, and at the dinner-hour made his way again to the street in which he had first seen

Mabrouka's red-curtained carriage, and listened to the sound of her *khal-khal*.

Conradin came forward to meet the young man as soon as the man-servant had admitted him into the vestibule.

"You look fatigued," he remarked, as he greeted him. "Is our Tunisian climate beginning to tell on you? Even you Sicilians find Tunis insupportable when the sirocco blows. Never omit your matutinal dose of quinine when the hot weather sets in."

Riccardo had, as a matter of fact, passed many sleepless nights lately; but he disclaimed ill-health, saying, "I should rather inquire after your wound."

"I feel it occasionally during the sirocco, and of late years increasingly—a sign of old age."

"The only sign then," the young man replied, with Southern readiness.

Conradin smiled, his light blue eyes fixed searchingly upon his guest's face. Riccardo's Southern comeliness was etherealised by the blue rings under his eyes, the transparency of his skin.

"A Persian would be writing love-poems to you, my dear friend," Conradin remarked in the cultured voice which contrived to irritate his guest. "You are of an extraordinary beauty—and a beauty not altogether of your nation."

Riccardo laughed in a constrained way. More than ever, since he met this man the first time since his adventure at Carthage, he felt the same reluctant attraction, almost equivalent to hatred. For there is a curious magnetism about hatred which will draw two people from opposite sides of the globe and force them to seek one another; merely to hate—as others love.

It was as if his unspoken thought had been communicated to Conradin. There was a peculiar expression in his light blue eyes as he met Riccardo's, as if they were alive with knowledge of him.

They were in the same bare but luxurious saloon as before; with its thick, comfortable carpets and cool tiling of Nabeul. There was a smell of incense in the room; and Riccardo noticed a green earthenware brazier still smouldering in the corner and sending up a thin thread of smoke.

"I have my perfume specially prepared for me in Zaghouan," Conradin observed, following his guest's gaze. "I am fastidious about perfumes. It is a pity that the art is being lost. I have a friend, a perfumer, who is so great an artist that he will spend months on a blend, and will devote a day in order to enjoy, in proper succession, the pure essences. Used properly and with discrimination, the sense of scent is as closely allied to the soul as the sense of hearing. My friend has devoted his entire life to the study of these essences, and for that purpose lives in poverty at Zaghouan, where all the distilleries have been built for centuries." He paused an instant, and added smoothly, "That is what the Occident is destroying little by little. It is not possible to the Western mind to understand the mysticism of perfumes. The French official could no more understand the delicacy of such a life as my friend's, than my friend could comprehend the spiritual processes of a drunken French soldier."

"Nevertheless, the official and the soldier govern," Riccardo said.

"That, certainly, is indisputable. But not for always, let us hope."

Riccardo reverted to the former subject. "But

surely the sense of smell, like the sense of taste, belongs to a lower order of beings."

"It is true that we have degraded both," his host answered. "Come, it is time for dinner. Are you hungry?"

"My degraded sense clamours," Riccardo laughed. Despite himself, the fascination of this man was upon him.

"I have remembered that it is your *jour maigre*," went on Conradin, "and have provided a fleshless menu, as well as meat, so that you can please yourself as to diet."

The colourless, English-looking man-servant waited at table. Conradin passed many current subjects in review, from the French fleet in the harbour to the latest news of the disturbances in Morocco. Riccardo fancied that his host seemed anxious to draw opinions from him.

He inquired after Ciccio Scarfi. He had heard from some one, he said, but he could not recollect from whom, that Signor Scarfi's health left something to be desired.

"He is a little indisposed," Riccardo replied, "but it is a nothing—an attack of nerves, perhaps." Then he added, with malicious intent, "We have had an invalid in the house, however, who was brought by yourself."

He thought he detected a momentary discomposure but Conradin merely repeated, "Myself?"

"Your double, I should say—Si Ismael, who picked him up in an almost dying condition and brought him to the house."

"The invalid was?"

"A connection of mine, the Marchese di San Calogero."

"I trust he is better. What was his injury?"

"A poisoned bite, of what animal the doctor could not determine."

"And the marchese himself could not say?"

"His memory of the evening appears to have been obliterated by the effects of the bite."

"Is he near his recovery?"

"So much so that he is clamouring to get back to work. There are discoveries at El-Hathera near Kairouan, it seems."

"Ah, so I read in the papers."

Later on Conradin asked—

"The work at the office—you find it agreeable?"

"It is quite pleasant . . ."

"You may eventually have the management of it?"

"I have heard nothing which would lead me to suppose so," said the young man guardedly.

"Perhaps you would find the business life too dull," the other said carelessly. "For you have the love of adventures, have you not? But there are plenty of adventures in Tunis, after all—even in the Rue du Caire."

Riccardo started imperceptibly, but his host's eyes were expressionless.

"It does not do to be adventurous all one's life," the Sicilian answered tritely enough. "Eventually one must marry, and settle down."

Then suddenly, to change the subject, he said—

"That reminds me—I should like to see a native wedding here."

"As a man you would not see much," answered Conradin. "A few mules laden with the household goods, and a few men in gala clothes, that is all. The women are shrouded."

"Ah, these hidden women," Riccardo returned. "To me there is something fascinating in this Eastern modesty which turns every woman into a mystery."

"Yet your countrymen will tell you that the Mahommedan woman is denied a soul," Conradin commented. "You will hear that she has no rights; that she has no honour; that she is beaten like a dog; that love in the Oriental imagination is sexual sensuality without redemption, even without affection." He laughed. "It is one of the unbridgeable gulfs between East and West. The Mussulman conception of womanhood," he went on after a pause, "is like other great conceptions—sordid often in realisation. But it was the noblest conception, the best. It did not ignore sex as monastic Christianity did, or revile it; celibacy to a Mussulman is a state of morbidity almost equivalent to murder. In Christianity marriage is called a sacrament, but married life is a perpetual sacrilege. Monogamy was the grudging outward concession allowed by celibacy. In generously honouring sex, the Mahommedan generously honours motherhood and the Deity. In honouring passion he honours life itself."

Riccardo listened, half-comprehending, half-misunderstanding. The man's talk never failed to have a hypnotic effect on him, in spite of their antagonism.

It was late before he left the house, and instinctively he lingered in the passing hope that he might see the carriage with red curtains and its liveried Arab. But there was no carriage, no tinkling *khal-khal*. The street was deserted except for two big Zouave officers making their way noisily back from the Casino, more than half intoxicated and laughing extravagantly. A

fine rain was falling, and the atmosphere was that of a hothouse. For one moment a carriage appeared. Then it drove quickly past him, and it had no red curtains. Riccardo's heart beat to suffocation. The Arab dancing-woman embodied for him in that moment all the attractions of this veiled life, at once so cosmopolitan and so far-removed from civilisation. One elusive night—and then absence and silence.

His imagination had been stirred more by his ignorance of her than by his knowledge of her, this waif of East and West. He had known it to be a foolish expectation, and yet was disappointed when he turned away to go home. He went by side-streets, avoiding the Avenue de France, though at ten it was as a rule deserted.

Once he paused with the inexplicable feeling that he was being followed. He saw no one. A second time, but on this occasion there was a dirty-looking Arab lighting a cigarette the length of half the street behind him. His camel's-hair burnous was too big for him, and he carried a halfa-grass basket, obviously one of the ragamuffins who hang about the market-place ready to carry home purchases for a halfpenny. Riccardo went on unconcernedly, and then, happening to turn a corner, looked round to see this same Arab boy gather his burnous tightly about him and run stealthily in the shadow of the wall so as to overtake him. This time he was certain that he was being pursued by this good-for-nothing, and, waiting behind the corner, he stood still until the youth turned it, when, coming out suddenly, he received the squirming body into his arms.

"Let me go!" cried the boy in shrill but passable French.

Riccardo kept a tight hold of the youngster, and caught a glimpse of steel beneath the folds of the camel's-hair robe.

"I was not intending to hurt monsieur," whimpered the boy, as his captor whipped the knife out of his hands.

"Arab scum are not allowed to carry arms in any case," Riccardo said firmly. "You will come with me to the police."

"No, no!" the boy whispered vehemently. "I cannot. I am a friend. I know your name—Riccardo Bastiagnini. I was sent to you, I have something to give you, only I was afraid in the open street. I swear that I am a friend!"

"What is it?" asked Riccardo suspiciously, still keeping an iron grasp on the boy's slender wrists.

"How can I give it if you hold my hands? You have my knife, I cannot harm you."

Riccardo released the boy's left hand, and with it he groped in his breast beneath the thick folds of the cloth. With the action Riccardo smelt an odour that sent the blood to his face. It was the rare, heavy perfume that Mabrouka had carried about her person. The boy handed him a pale yellow envelope, heavily sealed.

"Now, let me go," he said peevishly. "My wrists are sore."

A sudden suspicion came over Riccardo. He tore back the hood of the burnous, which, being of vast dimensions, completely enveloped the face of his captive. He merely encountered a veil of churlish thickness.

"It is thou, Mabrouka!" he exclaimed.

She dropped all feigning at once, and used her natural voice.

"Yes, it is I. The note is mine. Now let me go quickly; I am afraid of being seen, and with thee."

"I cannot let thee go. That does not happen twice."

"What nonsense! Thou speakest as a child."

He spoke hastily in a whirlwind of desire. "Come with me. I will get a carriage, close by. We will go to Carthage again—Mabrouka, for this one night."

"That was a mad adventure."

"Come again, then."

"I cannot," she returned. "I have gone beyond that which was necessary with thee as it is. Let me go."

"I will not. I shall never see thee again if I let thee go now. Listen, Mabrouka; I must see you to-night. I shall die if I cannot. I have suffered . . . like the damned. I shall not be cheated again. If you do not come with me, I swear I'll give you over to the next *sergent de ville* we meet; for carrying weapons! Choose."

She reflected. "Thy house is the number thirty-four in the Street of the Medersa-es-Slimania?"

"Yes."

"Thy chamber gives upon the street or upon the courtyard?"

"Upon the courtyard."

"It is in the upper storey?"

"Yes."

She burst into a little peal of laughter, muffled in her veil and burnous. "*Eiwa!* the lucky number! I will come there with you."

Riccardo was somewhat aghast. "But that is dangerous. We—you—might be seen——"

"Thou hast the keys?"

"Of the outer and inner door; but——"

"Well, I will accompany thee. We can go straight to thine apartment. There is none sleeping beside thee?"

"The room is separated from the rest."

"So much the better. Let us go together then. Only, promise, on thy soul, that thou wilt not seek to embrace me until I have quietly discussed a certain matter of business with thee."

"I promise," said Riccardo, elated at her caprice of submission, and resolved to dare everything. They walked on, side by side. The warm drizzle was blown into their faces by a hot wind. It was a sirocco night, a fever night. They reached the Arab quarter, and soon the Medersa-es-Slimania, and unfastened the heavy door. Mabrouka made no more noise than if she had been a shadow. Riccardo's chief fear was that they might encounter Salvatore returning from the Casino or Catacloum's. But the courtyard was empty. They reached his room without mishap; and once there he locked the door for safety's sake.

She pulled the eiderdown from the bed, and, putting it on the floor, sat herself cross-legged upon it, throwing off the burnous with a "*Wallah!*" of disgust, but retaining her long, embroidered veil. Riccardo lit the candle. The shaking light flickered on the crucifix. He remembered how a trick of the light on the ivory had reminded him of Mabrouka, and smiled. Then he flung himself impulsively down beside her and kissed the feet which she had just bared by removing her small shoes.

"You must not leave me again for so long, you must not leave me," he exclaimed, deliriously covering them with kisses.

"Your promise, your promise!" she cried, striking him with her flat hand.

The fear of being overheard made her lover pull himself together, and for a moment they both listened anxiously to hear if any creaking outside or unwonted sound betrayed a listener.

"Be careful, thou noisy tongue and little-heed," she whispered. "Open and read my letter."

"*Cara, cara!* Heart of me! For the love of heaven kiss me once. Take off that cursed veil! The other dancers go uncovered. Why not thou?"

"I will tell you," she replied, after some thought. "It is because I have made a vow not to show my face to any man save one. If I break that vow, I shall lose my luck."

"A lover, then," he said, with quick jealousy and a laugh which betrayed it.

"No, not a lover." She gave a great sigh.

"What is he then?"

"I cannot tell thee. . . . We will not speak of this."

"Why not?"

"No, no!" she added, with some petulance, as he made an impetuous movement. "Not now. Later. No kiss, no touch, no anything yet. Read the letter first." She kept one hand firmly on her veil, lest, in an access of brute passion, he should tear it off.

"What does it say that you cannot say to me yourself?" asked Riccardo impatiently, seeing the movement and chilled by it.

She reached over his shoulder and took the yellow envelope out of his hand; broke the seal, and thrust the unfolded paper before him.

"If you should get into difficulty on account of champagne, and need immediate help, go or send some one to the house in the wall which is next to the anchors of Noah in Kairouan, and speak the pass-

word, 'Sidi bel Hassan.' It will be answered to you, '*Iatik sad!*' in reply to which you will trace the five-point star in the dust of the threshold. Observe the directions minutely."

Riccardo stared at the missive. "What does it mean, in the name of goodness? Champagne? Am I a drunkard? With whom could I get into difficulty?"

"Hush!—I may not say."

"With Si Ismael, then?" he said, with quick intuition.

"Hush!" she said again fearfully, putting her hand on his. "I dare not tell thee more."

"But this is ridiculous. Thou must tell me the whole."

"If I tell thee more I shall be cursed. He has the power to cast evil."

"If he does not know that thou hast told me, how then can he overlook thee?" Riccardo asked, not knowing whether to be amused at this or to take it seriously.

"He would read my heart," she answered in tones of unmistakable fear. "Do not ask me about it. Thou must not ask. Thou wilt know soon."

Riccardo began to find it absurd, and smiled. There was something of the mystery of a child playing a secret game before grown-ups about her which he discovered to be adorable.

"Why tell me anything about it, then?"

"I wish thee well. I have affection for thee. Thou art young—almost a child. I cannot see thee utterly destroyed for want of counsel. And thou art pig-headed, so that I have feared for thee." At the word "destroyed" she brought down her closed hand with a vicious movement on to the soft surface of the eider-down. "The best is for thee to work with him and

not against him. One cannot fight him or escape him. I tried once——” She ended in a half-ferocious movement, like an animal’s.

“What hast thou had to do with him?” he cried in sudden, aching jealousy.

She was silent, and then laughed. “*Lä, lä!* Thou must not be envious over a dancing-woman, and a dancing-woman no longer young! And a dancing-woman who loves thee not for other reason than that thou art beautiful, and but half-grown into manhood.” She leant to him with a movement half-seductive, half-motherly.

“Stay with me!” he burst out again, seizing her arm and pressing his lips to it. “I have some money. I can keep thee near here in the Medina quarter, where no one can find thee, where no one can harm thee. Thou shalt have comfort. One day I shall be rich, and thou shalt have every luxury thou needest, everything I possess.”

He was conscious that she smiled underneath the veil. “And my freedom, for which I gave up everything that was mine? Dost thou suppose that I have not been loved before, that I have not loved before! My dear, my dear!” She broke off, then brought her fist with sudden energy down upon his shoulder. “Come, my child! Get me food. I am very hungry!”

Riccardo released her, with sudden revulsion.

She repeated her demand, laughing into his blank face.

“Thou hast been my guest, I will be thine.” Then she leant forward merrily: “Put the sleep-drink into the milk, if thou wilt!”

He looked rueful at the jest.

He could creep down to the pantry to get her food if he went softly. But to reach it he would have to pass Gioconda's door, and Gioconda slept lightly and might wonder at his going downstairs at such an hour. However, there was no help for it.

"Art thou not going?" she asked.

"Yes, yes. Wait for me here."

He took the precaution to relock the door after him on the outside, and crept quietly downstairs. Noiseless as he was, on the return journey a stair creaked, and what he dreaded happened.

Gioconda's door stood slightly open and she herself peered into the gloom.

"Who is it?" she asked.

Riccardo felt like a thief caught red-handed, with his tray of eatables. Happily it was dark and she could scarcely distinguish him.

"It is I, Gioconda. I felt hungry, and went downstairs to forage for myself."

"Oh, that is right. Did you find enough?"

He assured her that he had, and she bade him good-night. She withdrew again, and, retracing his steps, Riccardo gained his room and unlocked the door. The candle had been extinguished, and it was entirely dark.

"Mabrouka," he whispered, stretching his arms for her. He fancied he heard her warm breathing. Was she mischievously playing hide-and-seek with him?

No answer. He groped about silently, then his hand fell on the matches, and he struck one.

No one was there. He pulled aside the curtains, looked in the cupboard and underneath the bed. She was not there.

The door was locked on the outside, how then had she escaped? He uttered a malediction. The window,

it was true, was open, but it was a sheer drop of twenty feet to the courtyard. She might have gained the roof by climbing, cat-like, on to the woodwork of the window, built into the arcade of the Moorish house by a European architect, but then what? If she had reached the roof, there were no means by which she could have climbed into the street. Even if she had clambered on to the next terrace over the low piece of wall, she would have been confronted with difficulties; for if a stranger penetrates into the women's quarter of a private Moorish house he is liable to severe penalties.

He went uneasily to bed; he dared not creep again past Gioconda's room to reach the roof and satisfy himself that Mabrouka was not there. To his first bewilderment succeeded a wave of anger and disappointment, anger that swept his soul like a storm. She had fooled him for the second time.

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CHAPTER XIV

THE next morning the only token that Riccardo found of Mabrouka's visit to him was the yellow envelope containing her odd warning to him. He looked at it with hot eyes that had not known sleep that night, and read it through again. The old questioning was renewed. Why her interest in him? Why this letter of caution? Putting it into a pocket, he went to break his fast.

The day passed without event, save that he fancied a greater restlessness and irritability than usual in Ciccio Scarfi's manner, who, several times when they happened to be alone for a moment, opened his mouth as if to make a communication which he as suddenly withheld. Riccardo became alarmed lest he should have seen or heard anything during the previous night.

His apprehension deepened when his uncle came to his room after the evening meal, his face sallow and his mouth stern.

Ciccio entered his room nervously, his hands twitching, his eyes wandering suspiciously around the room.

"Can I talk with you a little?" he asked.

Riccardo rose from the sill, from whence he had been staring listlessly down into the courtyard, and pulled forward the only chair of the room, reseating himself again on the sill. He was almost prepared to welcome the reproaches of his uncle, if the imprudence

of last night were the matter of which he had come to speak—he was aware that he deserved them.

“*Già!* Shut the window, Riccardo,” the little man ordered uneasily. “It is possible to overhear by such means. I trust no one.”

Riccardo obeyed without comment.

Ciccio Scarfi's next words surprised him.

“Riccardo,” he began, drumming his browned fingers on the arm of the chair, “I have observed you closely since you came, *figlio mio*, and you seem to me to be worthy of the trust I am going to place in you. You have business ability, a good memory and a silent tongue. You have picked up the work at the office wonderfully well.”

Riccardo listened to these compliments with some inward misgiving. He leaned forward and lit the lamp. “I hope everything is going well, *zio?*”

Ciccio made a hasty movement. “Yes, yes, everything is well. Why should it not be well? You have seen nothing that would lead you——”

“The saints forbid! We had an excellent report this week.”

Ciccio breathed heavily, as if with relief.

“A silent tongue,” he repeated, reverting to his former phrase. “Yes, that is better than everything. I relied on the Bastiagnini stock when I wrote over to you to come here. Giovanna, the saints rest her soul! was in love with another man when she married me. But a Bastiagnini can be depended on. That is why I gave my wife a free rein. With all her better blood, she never made a fool of me or of herself.”

Riccardo waited, and wondered to what end this wandering preamble might lead.

“Salvatore,” Ciccio continued, “although he is my

own flesh and bone, is not reliable. There is bad blood between us, and he has no head for business. But the young fool could work under supervision, and in time might steady down." He paused.

"Why, of course."

"Yes, of course. But now I've got something to tell you, *figlio mio*, that no one but yourself must know. . . . I am in danger. I am being followed, spied upon. I may die at any moment."

"Your life is endangered! How? By whom?"

Ciccio Scarfi sank his voice to a whisper; his cheeks seemed to fall in and contract. "The Mafia."

Riccardo had guessed that his uncle was a mafioso—most Sicilians of the elder generation pay their tribute money to the secret society which works its will, holds its tribunals, and receives its tithes in the very teeth of the Government. But that the Mafia should extend its arm to Tunis to threaten his uncle's life—a peaceable citizen of a foreign country—amazed him. He began to think that Ciccio must be suffering from a delusion.

"‘Little Sicily’ is full of the mafiosi," Ciccio went on, fear in his eyes.

"You have no quarrel with the local *capitano*? You pay them their dues?"

"I have done so for years."

"What is the cause, then?"

"It was I who betrayed the mafioso Caltanissetta. I brought him in safely to Tripoli in a cargo-boat, and there gave him up secretly to the police."

"But why?"

"He had been Giovanna's lover before she married me. He was of her class, one of the *nobili*. She still

loved him. And there was a Government reward on his head. I needed money."

"You, you betrayed Caltanissetta—and for money!" Riccardo exclaimed in horror.

"The money was not so important to me as to have the man transported."

Riccardo checked himself. Jealousy, without which there is no love in Sicily, makes even treachery a venial sin.

"How, then, has it been discovered at this late date?"

"Giovanna was never the same until the day of her death, which took place shortly afterwards; but I do not think that she had suspicion of the truth. She only knew that I had failed to bring him into safety, and despised me for it. She was a bitter woman for all her soft ways, and could not forgive me. She died when Annunziata was born, a month later. She was not meant to be a shipping merchant's wife, Riccardo—she loved her own people best, and was fond of the society of her own class. She was one of the most beautiful women in Tunis then: she and her friend, Madame Tresali—the hag."

Riccardo suddenly remembered what Si Ismael had said about seeing Giovanna Scarfi at the reception of Madame Tresali years ago, but kept his thought to himself.

"Caltanissetta himself did not discover who had given him up," Ciccio went on. "There was only one person outside the police officials, who knew—and that was Si Ismael."

Riccardo started. The name followed so pat upon his reflection of the moment past.

"Tell me everything, *zio*," he said.

Ciccio Scarfi's face was darkened with the past, with memories of the beautiful wife who had never given him her patrician heart.

"When I left him at Tripoli with the Italian officials, I came back. My affairs were getting desperate. Giovanna was extravagant, and I hated to deny her anything. She had lost money again and again at Madame Tresali's card-tables. I seldom accompanied her, the diplomatic set were not in my line. Then I had misfortunes in the shipping. I was on the verge of bankruptcy. The reward was a drop in the ocean. I tried to keep up face, but I knew that if creditors demanded a settlement I should not be able to meet them. It was a bad year. As you know, most of our small trading vessels ply between Marseilles and Tunis, touching at Philippeville and other harbours along the coast. Now, I have an interest in two of the largest importing companies, but then I was only the owner of a few poor little trading boats, and two of these boats had gone down in a gale, with their entire cargoes. I had delayed my insurance, in an effort to economise and gain time.

"I was at my wits' end. I knew the crash must come, and I saw myself, once a fairly well-to-do man, starting life again. I could not look to Giovanna for help, estranged as we were; and I feared to tell her of my trouble in her condition. She had been always delicate, and I could not bear to think that she would have a rough life of it in the end, who had married me thinking me a rising man. I tell you, *figlio mio*, when that last piece of bad news came—that I could not claim my insurance, I was a broken man. I remember I went into the Church of Santa Croce in the Rue de l'Eglise—you know it—and sobbed like a little

child. I made a vow to Santa Lucia, whose shrine is on the north—she was my mother's patron—that if help came even at the eleventh hour I would give an annual sum to her shrine at Syracuse, and go at least thrice a year to Mass. But I begin to think, like most of you young ones, that the saints are not able to do much to help one, for all their smooth promises—curse them!”

He sat forward, and continued—

“At that moment, when I was in the utmost despair, I received a summons to the Bardo to speak to Si Ismael ben Aloui. I had heard Giovanna speak of him when he first came to Tunis, a short while before that: it appears that he had political influence, and the old fox, Madame Tresali, wished to have him within nail-paring and teeth-drawing distance. He was then a younger man, but already considered important. People said then that if he had been in Tunis in 1881, when the Tresali helped the French to outwit the Italians and take Tunis without a blow, that the history of Europe would have been altered. But I don't pretend to know much about politics—and I would gladly see the Arabs swept into the sea, no matter by what nation.”

“He lives at the Bardo?”

“Not now. He was then the guest of the Bey. That does not matter much to what I have to tell you. . . . Si Ismael received me in a small apartment in one of the wings of the palace, and, after sending for coffee and making me sit down, he began, as soon as we were alone, ‘It has grieved me, Signor Scarfi, to learn of your misfortunes.’ I thanked him, and said that I was gratified by the interest he showed in me, inwardly damning the fellow's impertinence. He went

on, 'I understand your affairs are in an embarrassed condition.' I replied that my reverses had grown in the public rumour, and that I hoped soon to retrieve the small losses I had suffered. He waved his hand patiently. 'Nevertheless,' he said, 'if I were to inform you that eighty thousand francs were at your immediate disposal, for repayment whenever you thought fit——' My mouth fell open. It seemed as if the vow I had made to Santa Lucia were accepted, and my heart leapt up within me. I could not get a word to my tongue.

"Without another syllable, Si Ismael thrust his hand into his embroidered sash, and drew out a leather pocket-book. He counted out the notes till they lay in a crisp heap before me.

"'There is a favour I would ask of you in return,' he said, and, reading my fallen face, added urbanely, 'If you grudge it, the money is yours notwithstanding.' I reproached myself, and said, 'Whatever I can do without loss of honour to me or mine, I will do gladly in gratitude.'

"'Very well, then,' he said. 'It is that you will do me the favour of personally supervising the unlading of some consignments of champagne which I intend to send from time to time in your vessels from Marseilles to one of the ports at which you touch, and here. I should wish you to guarantee that they shall not be unpacked at the Customs, but delivered intact to my agents as soon as the duty has been paid. The cases shall not exceed a certain weight, and I will see that you suffer no loss.'

"I spread out my hands in dismay. 'Even if the consignment is declared, you are aware that the Government insists upon periodical examination of the cargoes.'

“‘I also know,’ said Si Ismael, ‘that the superintendent, newly appointed, is a Sicilian, and that he is a mafioso.’

“‘What is that to me?’ I asked.

“He gave me the countersign. I was dumbfounded for the moment. What should this Arab know of the Mafia? powerful though the society was in those early days, when Little Sicily was the biggest of all the foreign quarters, and the French only able to look after themselves, let alone the Italians, whom they loved as little as one cock another in a poultry-yard. But I had never heard of an Arab belonging to the Mafia, and doubted the evidence of the sign which he gave.

“‘I am not a mafioso,’ continued Si Ismael, with a smile. ‘But you can doubtless arrange with Rospigni, the superintendent.’

“I knew that if what he said were true, and Rospigni were a mafioso, a demand from me to the local *capitano* would secure the cases from scrutiny, even if Rospigni had ceased to have active connection with the society, which was probable, since he was in French employ.

“‘How can I tell that our *capitano* will agree to restrict Rospigni?’ I asked.

“‘Such matters will be easy to you—who enabled Caltanissetta to escape,’ Si Ismael replied, drinking his coffee leisurely.

“I preserved my self-control by force. ‘You are misinformed,’ I returned. ‘He did not escape, unfortunately.’

“‘Ah, was that so?’ he answered. ‘Then it is probable that if it were known, the man who betrayed him would have a short life?’

"I saw then that by some infernal means he knew. I looked at him as if he were the devil.

"‘You see,’ Si Ismael said, ‘I am frank with you. It will spoil this particular brand of champagne to allow the air to penetrate the sealed packing-cases—all save one, which will be prepared to stand the atmosphere. To protect them I must put them into the care of a man who has his own life at stake, in the care of a man who superintends himself the conduct of his business, and who would run no risk of letting a friend’s champagne be spoilt. It would be a pity to lose both good champagne and a friend!’

"I sat still, staring at the pile of notes that meant freedom and honour, and the silence of this man in a matter which meant swift death to me if it were known. There was no question of choice, I was a desperate man. It might be that this help was sent by Santa Lucia herself in answer to my prayer. I invoked her protection in this mysterious compact.

"So the matter was settled, and I agreed to all he proposed. I proceeded to write a note of debit, but as soon as I had handed it to Si Ismael, he held a lighted match to it till the charred fragments fluttered to the ground.

"‘It is on your word that I rely,’ said he.

"When I got out again into the fresh air, I felt dazed, drunken. I felt the notes, and examined them. They were perfectly good. I took them to my bankers. My credit was saved."

"You still owe him money?" Riccardo asked.

"I have repaid every penny. . . . But I have not finished yet. Rospigni agreed, under command of the *capitano*, to help me, and this he has done until recently, though several times we have been upon the verge of

being discovered by the Government—which would mean my ruin in Tunis. But Rospigni has no further need of subsidies from me, he is marrying a rich girl, and is glad to escape to Rome. The man appointed in his stead is a Frenchman. I have constantly approached Si Ismael on the question of releasing me from my promise to him. He merely threatens me, indirectly (the cursed Arab is never direct), with exposing me to the Mafia. But now that Rospigni has gone, I have taken active steps. The cases were refused by my orders at Marseilles last week."

"And you think that he has kept his threat and betrayed you to the Mafia?"

"I know that I am being watched—I feel it."

The man's plebeian face was livid, and wet.

"This may be imagination."

"It is not imagination. If the Mafia know, it is only a question of time. Last night I heard sounds of stealthy footsteps in the house, and lay sweating with suspense in my bed, my revolver beside me. My nerves play me tricks: I see figures lurking in the darkness for me. Yet, I have resolved to risk everything sooner than wreck the future of my children."

"The footsteps last night can be explained, at all events," Riccardo said. "I crept downstairs to the pantry to get something to eat. It is likely that all your anxiety may have arisen through similar causes."

Ciccio Scarfi was silent.

"You take precautions?"

"I never go unarmed, am seldom alone."

"*Coraggio* then! These threats may be what the Americans call the bluff."

Ciccio smiled sadly. "It is of the two girls that I am thinking. I do not like to leave them unprotected.

Gioconda, she is a woman, she will always be wise ; but it is for my little Annunziata that I feel most anxiety. She needs a protector." He paused expectantly.

"*Ma che !* If anything happened I should care for them both as if they were my own sisters," Riccardo said.

Ciccio frowned. "Annunziata will have a good dowry. Why should you not marry her?"

Riccardo felt embarrassed. "But—but, she is so young."

"All the better, *figlio mio*. You can train her as you wish. Fifteen is marriage-ripe, upon my soul! My own sister married when she was fourteen, and died in childbirth at seventeen."

"I had not thought of marriage yet——"

"*Santa Madonna !* One would suppose that I was asking you to marry an ape, a withered baboon! Where is your blood, man, and what colour is it?"

"I have no reason to suppose she loves me," Riccardo objected.

"*Santissimo Dio !* We are not English, I hope! I should hope she did not, indeed. You will have to teach her all that." He plucked at his swarthy moustache. "You are not in love with any one else?"

"No," Riccardo answered. Mabrouka belonged to the moonlight and its transitory madness, to the illegitimate realm which is romance. Besides, he had finished with her, or persuaded himself that he had. The *Fata Morgana* was too elusive for a man to follow and keep his senses.

"Then there is no cause which prevents your marrying her. As I have said, she will have a dowry. I shall leave the conduct of the business to you entirely, with its profits." Ciccio metaphorically swept them together with a gesture of his hands.

There was no actual reason, when Riccardo sought for one, and he sat somewhat confused. Something in the expectant, pathetic attitude of the nervous man before him moved him to sudden consent.

"You are kinder than I deserve," he said at length. "I will try to make her happy."

"The betrothals shall be announced, then, in the *Giornale* here and in the Sicilian papers." His face softened as he added, "You will have to be clever with her. She is adventurous and romantic—like her mother. I have spoilt the child a bit. She is the youngest—my baby."

He rose, and Riccardo embraced him heartily, with more liking than he had ever felt for him before.

"I should not hurry matters if I were not at a point when I might have to leave everything behind me." The shadow of death was again in his eyes, and he crossed himself. Riccardo followed his example, more through instinct than through a religious spirit.

"The Madonna protect you!" he exclaimed, using the formula of his childhood. "*Sempre coraggio!*"

Ciccio drew down his brows. "The Holy Madonna is not likely to perturb herself. I've been a bad Catholic, most of my life. Whatever happens now, will happen in spite of the Madonna herself."

"There is one thing that I cannot understand," Riccardo said, returning to the subject of Si Ismael, "why does not Si Ismael transport these cases in his own yacht?"

"He is suspect. At one time he was plying backwards and forward at frequent intervals, but something happened which put a stop to it. Since the trouble with Morocco especially it has been too dangerous. The explosives we have transported for him are

forwarded to the interior, I suppose. How, I have no conception—that is his affair.” .

So the interview ended. Here was the explanation of Mabrouka's champagne. It struck Riccardo as humorous that he had accepted hospitality of this man, had been at his house only yesterday. One thing pleased him, and that was that his mistrust of Si Ismael, instinctive before, had now a definite reason. Si Ismael was endeavouring to fit a second string to the bow in case the first snapped; but this time he would not find the gut so pliable.

Riccardo pondered over many things that night as he lay abed. What had Mabrouka to do with it all? Was her warning entirely genuine, or was it a trap? Was she a friend, or was he to count her among the enemy? In thinking of her, he experienced the exquisite pain which comes to the lover in thinking of the beloved. She was as insidious as Si Ismael's rare perfumes, and her strangeness and sweetness were the magnets that drew him after her.

But he sought no more for the red curtains, nor listened for the *khal-khal* of silver.

CHAPTER XV

THE sirocco had blown itself out, and the sky above the white roofs and domes of the Arab quarter was again blue and unstained. The prospect of a blazing day decided Giovanni to set out for El-Hathera by the forenoon: he was eager to get to work. Father Dupré and Father Michaud had written to him of the marvels that were being daily yielded up by the reluctant earth to the spades of the workmen. Giuseppe, his servant, was to accompany him in the capacity of chauffeur, cook, valet, and fellow-archæologist, his versatility being equal to any calling that his master had need of. As the two girls were friendly with Madame Perrier, the proprietress of one of the two hotels in Kairouan, Gioconda gave him a note of introduction, making him undertake to sleep in the shelter of the town if the weather chanced to be inclement, though he protested that his tent was more weather-proof than any hotel. In his turn, Giovanni extracted the promise that they would come to stay at Kairouan before long, so that he might show them the excavations at El-Hathera.

After the midday meal, when their guest had departed, Ciccio Scarfi called back to Annunziata over his paper, as she was about to follow the others out of the room—

"Stay a moment, *caridda*! I want to speak to thee."

"What is it?" she asked, coming back and seating herself on the arm of his chair. "You are not going to scold me again? Papa mio, you are so ill-tempered lately that I cannot endure you!" She gave him a kiss as she spoke, to belie her words.

"Thou little cat! when have I been harsh with thee?"

"Thou art never harsh with me, papa mio; and I love thee dearly." She placed her two young arms round his neck.

"I have been unwell of late . . . when I speak hastily, it is because I am not in good health."

"Thou must see a doctor."

"Yes, I shall see a doctor soon. But I have something important to say to thee, little one."

She swung her feet, one arm still around his neck, her head against his.

"I know what you are going to say."

"Thou canst not know, little cat."

"But I do. You want me to marry Riccardo."

Her father's prepared diplomacy was swept from him.

"I want you to——"

"Yes, you." She faced him with flushed cheeks.

"*Caridda, caridda*! What is this that thou art saying! Riccardo has spoken himself to thee——"

"He has not approached me. I am not blind. You settled that he was to marry me before he came! Ah, I was angry!"

Her father's brow clouded.

"What nonsense thou art talking, child."

"It is no nonsense. You and Gioconda have thought that I did not understand. You want Riccardo to

have the business, and me as well—I am thrown in with the ledgers and accounts!”

“Silence!” her father cried angrily. “Hold thy tongue!”

She closed her mouth mutinously.

“Why cannot Riccardo marry Gioconda?”

“Riccardo loves thee.”

She was silent.

“He loves thee, I say,” her father repeated in an irritated tone.

“Riccardo loves me? *Che!* I know what a lover should look like! Don’t tell me that he loves me. Have I not eyes?”

Ciccio Scarfi reddened. “What is this, Annunziata! Thou talkest of *lovers!* In my youth a modest girl——”

“In my youth, papa mio, it is different. Riccardo does not love me, and I will not be thrown in with the office furniture.”

Her father was speechless for a moment at this unexpected resistance. Then he as suddenly cooled.

“*Caridda,*” he said, “be not foolish. Riccardo is a good-looking young man. Every girl in Tunis will envy you. You are fond of him, and he is fond of you. This talk about lovers is novel talk; it does not happen in real life.”

“And did you not love my mother, then, when you married her?”

“*Sicuro!* little daughter. I worshipped her.”

“And she—she worshipped you!”

Ciccio winced. “It isn’t for the woman to marry for love. A woman marries the man in whom her parents see a suitable husband. The affection comes afterward.”

She was silent. Tears sprang beneath her black-lashed eyelashes. Ciccio could never stand a woman's tears. He endeavoured to steel himself against her wet eyes. "That is what comes of reading these romances," he blustered. "Romance! Are we English, I should like to know? Romance is not a proper thing for a young girl to talk about! She should trust herself to the judgment of her elders."

"I am sure that if mother were alive she would not like me to marry Riccardo in this way," Annunziata said in low, passionate tones.

Ciccio set his face. The dead woman seemed to be speaking through his younger daughter's lips.

"Go then," he cried bitterly. "Please thyself. But leave me, leave me, I say. The day will come when thou wilt be sorry that thou hast denied me this wish for thy good."

She slipped off the arm of his chair, frightened at his aspect.

"Leave me!" he cried violently. "You womenkind are all the same—I have never had any good of you!"

Annunziata looked at him for a moment, terrified. She had never seen him in so black a mood. Then she fled away like a startled hare, to fling herself, weeping, into her sister's arms upstairs. Gioconda only soothed her, she asked no questions; and Annunziata, for the first time in her life, kept the doors of her confidence shut.

"Riccardo," said Ciccio Scarfi later, to his nephew, "there are a couple of fools in this house, it seems. You denied that Annunziata loved you; she denies that you love her. I should say that there are three fools, for instead of insisting upon obedience as my

father would have done if any of his daughters had aired their whims, I have consented to let the matter be. . . . It shall make no difference to you. What I have said I will do for you, I will do. . . . But, Riccardo, she is worth winning. She is like her mother. There are some women with whom one must go delicately. Don't make the mistake I made, Riccardo. My God! don't make the mistake I made."

Riccardo began to regard his cousin with curious eyes. Until now she had appeared to him merely a pretty, petulant child. Her attitude with regard to the betrothal placed her in a different light. Moreover, she treated him with a greater coolness, an aloofness that seemed to endow her with a new womanliness. He was at a loss to account for her enmity.

One day he came upon her in the second patio as she was feeding the two remaining flamingoes with stale bread.

She hailed him with a touch of her old manner, and gave him a mischievous look.

Riccardo seated himself beside her on the stone rim of the disused fountain-basin and watched her.

"You have not invited me to feed the flamingoes lately," he observed.

"Do you need invitations?" she replied indifferently, throwing the remainder of the bread all together to the flamingoes, who flapped their wings in their awkward and greedy efforts to get as much as they could.

"Annunziata, you are offended with me. What have I done?"

She evaded his meaning lightly. "Nothing—what should you have done?"

"But you treat me differently, *cugina mia*."

She gave the young man a flickering look of laughter.

"Papa asked you to marry me," she said, with pleasant demureness.

Riccardo was almost taken off his guard by this elfish attack.

"I asked him if he would have any objection——" he replied, meeting her accusing eyes squarely.

"There is no necessity to lie to me about it, since we are both in accord on the subject," the girl answered.

"But we are not in accord on the subject," he returned, piqued by her manner.

"How? What do you mean?"

"I said we were not in accord. I wish to marry you."

"Do not tax your imagination by inventing," Annunziata retorted quickly. Her green eyes sparkled with indignation. "Riccardo! I am not a child, or a fool."

"It is the truth," he persisted, with some anger. "I want to marry you. I mean to marry you."

She stared at him without speaking.

Then she said slowly, "I hate you, Riccardo."

"That does not matter," he returned coolly.

She crimsoned.

"I hate you and despise you!" she repeated.

"You wish me to leave you then, as my company is distasteful to you?"

She nodded her head without speaking.

He rose, and kicked a piece of bread that lay at his feet towards the quarrelling flamingoes. Then, on a swift predatory impulse, he turned round quickly to the girl, and, taking her firmly into his arms, kissed her

full on her mouth, dwelling on its softness by sheer force.

She struck at him again and again, and struggled, but had no succour until he had of his free will released her. Then drawing in her breath speechlessly, and with a face the colour of the flamingoes' wings, she fled from him into the house, and into her own chamber. Riccardo saw her no more that day.

During the following week, San Calogero reappeared. He had business at Tunis, but came in to lunch with his late hosts. He no longer had the look of an invalid; he had become bronzed through exposure to the sun and air. El-Hathera, he explained, was about twenty kilometres outside Kairouan. They had discovered the remains of a temple, the foundations of a Roman house with fine mosaics, and some remarkable fragments.

"Tell me," said Ciccio, interrupting him, "what is this about Sfax and Kairouan being in a discontented condition? They are trying to hush it up in the papers, but I hear that they have drafted some soldiers down there to reinforce the garrison, which sounds ominous."

San Calogero shrugged his shoulders. "How grave it is, I am unable to say," he replied. "Personally, I avoid politics, and I like the Arabs. But race-feeling is running high in the South just now. It is disagreeable for a nation of fanatics to see a sacred city like Kairouan—seven pilgrimages to Kairouan count as one to Mecca, I believe—invaded by foreigners, policed by foreigners, and polluted by foreigners. But the crux at the present moment appears to be the behaviour of the tourists in the mosques and at religious

festivals. Some fanatic has been stirring up the population about it, and there is a miracle-monger about. If this mosque-visiting were done decently there would not be so much objection; but hordes of German, French, English, and American tourists invade them at the hours of prayer; do not even remove their shoes or keep strictly off the matting, as they are forced to do in Europeanised Algiers; and they laugh, talk, shout and kodak while the Mahommedans are trying to say their prayers. It is not an incentive to content, from the Arab's point of view."

"Then there is nothing actually serious?" Gioconda asked.

"I imagine there is something serious behind. A section of the Pan-Islamic movement has its headquarters in Kairouan—and it is an intelligent force, controlled by intelligent people. It is with this organisation that we shall have to cope in North Africa in the eventual future, not with any isolated power. Religion to the Arab, accustomed as he is to tribal government and the foreign factor, is a more binding force than anything else. It is his religion that stands between him and race obliteration, as it has stood for the Jew before him."

Ciccio Scarfi listened closely. To both Riccardo and himself there was a vital interest in the subject.

"I had no idea that the Arabs were so serious," Annunziata remarked, with a puzzled sigh.

San Calogero laughed. "The Arab I love best is the gay, lying, agreeable creature who spends his time in coffee and dominoes and love."

"Ah, you are speaking of the Algerians," Gioconda said, with a smile. "In Tunisia they are sullen and grave."

“But in my belief, it is among the gay, excitable Southerners that the mine will be sprung, and the Prophet produced, if the movement ever comes to anything. But not yet, I hope, for the sake of our excavations. When are you all coming down? The car is big enough for five besides Giuseppe.”

CHAPTER XVI

THERE is a certain feeling of security which follows after any protracted period of suspense. The man with an aneurism of the heart who at first dies daily, comes in a little while to think of death as an unpleasant fable: the inhabitants of the little lava towns of treacherous Etna content themselves with the belief that they hold trumps in the gamble with the imprisoned god of fire.

So it was with Ciccio Scarfi. Having shared his fears with Riccardo, he felt an ease equivalent to relief. Riccardo's arguments produced their effect. Even supposing that Si Ismael had conveyed the secret of the betrayal of Caltanissetta to the Mafia, there was still the chance that the society would think him a greater asset alive than dead. There would be blackmail to pay, sooner or later, and heavy blackmail. But Si Ismael's silence was the thing that most puzzled him.

Easter had passed some time ago; the Lenten veil in Santa Croce had been rent after the Sicilian fashion, and the figure of the Risen Saviour stood upon the high altar. Ciccio left weekly offerings in secret at the shrine of his mother's patron in the emigrant church. It was well to have the saints on one's side, if possible. He also wore a black stone amulet, that had been in his family for three generations, suspended round his neck next to his skin.

Riccardo made it his care to accompany his uncle to and from the shipping offices. Several times, however, after Ciccio's confession to him, Riccardo, walking swiftly beside him in the dusk on their homeward way, had the intuition that their footsteps were being dogged. Of this he said nothing to Ciccio, and twice or thrice he turned again when they had reached the house, to see if he could discover a suspicious-looking person in the vicinity, but without success. He only saw peaceful Arabs wending their way home to the harem after their day of toil and talk in the souks, or semi-Europeanised Jews from whom the Arabs pulled their fair robes with looks of hatred.

The 28th of May was Annunziata's seventeenth birthday. It was also the date of her mother's death, and in the morning Ciccio went with his daughters, first to hear a Mass, and then to place a wreath of flowers upon Giovanna's grave, in the Italian division of the municipal cemetery. He had done this annually ever since the year of his wife's death. Salvatore and Riccardo went alone to the office, and met the other three at lunch on their return. The two girls were laden with the wild-flowers that grew plentifully on the waste ground of the cemetery, and were in good spirits. Ciccio was less morose than he had been for a long while, and petted his younger daughter extravagantly. Since the day when she had refused to consent to the betrothal he had treated her with a dull resentment, that Gioconda, who had guessed the reason, found unjust towards her sister.

"How was the tomb of *la mamma* looking?" inquired Salvatore, over the soup, which he devoured with a noise like a steam-saw.

"*Bellissimo!*—most beautiful," Annunziata answered, with the serious enthusiasm of the Latin races for the pomp and circumstance of death. "There is a new tomb close by, Salvatore; a beauty, of the Signora Lucchese, all of white marble, with a bust of the signora in Carrara stone, exactly like life, even to the lace shawl and cameo brooch that she used to wear on a *festa*. Do you remember, Gioconda?"

Gioconda smiled. Italian sepulchral sculpture did not appeal to her, but her religious sense did not permit her to say so.

Annunziata finished her soup.

"There was another wreath to-day, when we arrived—on *la mamma's* tomb, I mean; a lovely new beadwork one, with '*Sempre Fidele*' on it."

"Who on earth sent it?" Salvatore asked, turning to his father.

Ciccio poured himself out some wine—he had broached a finer vintage to-day in honour of Annunziata.

"Possibly Madame Tresali," he said. "I cannot think of any one else."

"Madame Tresali!" exclaimed Riccardo. "Is she in Tunis then?"

"Yes, and half-mad. She dresses like a young woman still, and imagines she makes conquests," Salvatore replied, with a brutal laugh. "I saw her the other day in her carriage—painted to kill, and wearing a golden wig. She must be close on seventy."

"Poor thing!" Gioconda said softly.

"She was a great friend of *mamma's*," Annunziata explained. "She was still beautiful then in a way; though not so beautiful or young as *la mamma*, was she, *papa mio*?"

Ciccio grunted behind his glass.

"Papa *caro*, do not snort at me! It is my birthday, and you must be amiable to me; very, very amiable. Dost thou hear, thou snorting papa?"

Ciccio broke into a grudging smile, which broadened.

"I will be amiable, *caridda*, as a skipping lambkin."

"Let us consider," Annunziata said, nestling her chin into her palm—"let us consider what form the amiability of papa shall take."

"Oho, thou little Jewess! The amiability is to be concrete, then?"

She regarded him, laughing, from under her long lashes.

"Of course, of course! The amiability which should exist every day in a mental state should take a definite form on a birthday. *Non è vero, Riccardo?*"

"I thoroughly agree," said the young man thus appealed to, whose own amiability that morning had taken the form of a bangle for his cousin's shapely wrist. Peace had been restored between them, in public; but Annunziata, since his misbehaviour, had avoided being with him alone.

"What is the definite form upon which you have decided?" Ciccio asked.

"I know—bonbons of the best chocolate," Salvatore guessed.

She glanced at him with scorn.

"I am no longer a child! Guess again."

"A day at the Kram?" Gioconda hazarded.

"The Casino," from Riccardo.

"You are all of you bad guessers. Papa *carino*—I thought you would like to take us, perhaps, to the Teatro Rossini? To-night they are giving *Pagliaccio*

and *Cavalleria Rusticana*, with the new tenor." She looked coaxingly at her father.

"To the Opera? *Ma sicuro, caridda!* I will book seats for us all—how many? Let us see: five! That will not be too many for one of the large boxes."

"No, no—let us go into the stalls," she amended. "One cannot see so well in a box."

The Teatro Rossini was well filled when they entered it to take their seats. They had driven in a cab after walking as far as the Rue Djazira—it was not thought suitable, among the Italians in Tunis, to arrive at the Opera on foot, though the distance was inconsiderable and the pavements clean. It was also inadmissible to wear a *decolletée* toilet, so the sisters wore high-necked evening dresses. The galleries and cheaper seats were filled with Sicilians of the poorer classes, but in the stalls and boxes all nations were represented—among them a few well-to-do Arabs in robes and turbans.

"The boxes are nearly all full to-night," Annunziata remarked, turning her opera-glasses upon them. "There are Signora De Angelis and Grazia! and there is Madame Tresali of whom we were talking—over there in that box with her son—that old woman with the yellow wig!"

Riccardo looked in the direction indicated, and saw the woman of whom he had heard so much. She was elaborately dressed and made-up, but wrinkled beneath her rouge, and blinked frequently as if her eyesight were imperfect. This, then, was his aunt's friend—the celebrated *intrigante* who had helped to make history. There was something forlorn about her appearance, a fallen dignity which aroused his compassion.

"Do you know her?" Riccardo asked.

"She used to send us *dragées* and silk stockings when we were little, but her memory is failing now, and she rarely recognises us. One day not long ago she stopped me in the street, and said, 'Giovanna, my dearest Giovanna, art thou less unhappy? The years will bring him back to thee.' I suppose she thought that I was mother. Papa says my mother had hair and eyes like mine. . . . See! there is the English Consul and his wife, and there is Signor Valenti—the richest Sicilian in Tunis—that man who is staring at us over there."

Surrounded by the warm odour of perfumes and flowers, and the tiers of lighted boxes, Riccardo was reminded of the opera-house in Palermo, to which he had gone nightly in his student days. . . . The orchestra had begun. . . . Annunziata bent forward to listen, the nape of her neck white against the splendid gold of her well-dressed hair.

Riccardo felt pride in her. She was the most beautiful girl that he could see; on an occasion like this her fair skin and shining head made her far more noticeable than Gioconda.

The curtain went up, and the opera had begun. Soon the laughing Columbine was drawn on to the stage in her ribbon-harnessed cart—a young diva who was making her last appearance here before going back to Milan. Her entry was vociferously hailed with *Vivas* from the Italians, and a shower of bouquets was hurled on the stage at her feet. The little diva had sung through the winter season in Tunis, and, overcome with emotion, curtsied and bowed her thanks, while the excitable house *brava'd* and *viva'd* anew.

Ciccio bent back from time to time to murmur his approval of the tenor to Riccardo across Annunziata's back.

"That was well sung. . . . *Santo Dio!* the man has a throat. . . . *Bravo, bravissimo!*"

Once Riccardo brushed accidentally against his cousin's bare forearm, and, apologising, saw with surprise the colour mantle into her cheeks, though she kept her eyes toward the stage. Riccardo felt his pulses beat faster for the knowledge of that touch and the brave blush which it had produced, for her proximity was not without its effect upon him.

"Here comes the scene where Pagliaccio stabs her," Annunziata whispered with a sigh. "I close my eyes in this part; I cannot bear to see it. It was a cruel thing, and I have heard the story is a true one."

"He was justified," said Riccardo.

"Ah, no . . . if jealous women killed the men who were unfaithful to them, we should lose more than in a big war."

"What should you know of such things?"

She smiled. "Women do not need to read those things. I knew them when I was very young. . . Riccardo, observe, I am going to close my eyes." The long lashes fluttered down upon her cheeks.

Upon the stage the pitiful little drama was nearing its close, and the lights were already turned down for the moment when the maddened husband in the strolling-players' booth speaks out of his part and accuses his wife of infidelity.

"Very good," said Ciccio Scarfi; "very good indeed. La Marini is in voice to-night."

The scream of the murdered Columbine rang out from the stage.

"Very good," Ciccio repeated, wiping his eyes. "*Eccellente, eccell—*" His voice ended with an odd gurgle, his arms were flung upwards, and he fell forward, face downward.

A second and wilder scream went up in the darkness of the auditorium, the terrified shriek of a girl.

"Some one has stabbed papa!—some one has killed him!"

There was an immediate confusion. There were hysterical cries from the women, excited shouts from the men. The singers stopped and looked anxiously into the darkened house.

"Lights, lights!"

"What has happened?"

"Fire, is there a fire?"

"Some one has fainted!"

"Some one has been hurt!"

"Murder!"

"*Santo Dio!*"

"Fire, fire! Let us get out!"

"Stop the murderer!"

"The saints preserve us!"

In the midst of the hubbub the curtain came down, and the lights were turned on to a scene of panic and scrambling men and women. Ciccio Scarfi was lying with his head into the next row of seats, and beside him a pool of blood was collecting slowly.

Annunziata was sobbing wildly in an agony of fear, Gioconda and Riccardo were at the wounded man's side.

"It was the man—the man in front. . . . I saw him turn quickly."

"What was he like?" some asked, and a hundred voices clamoured questions.

"It was dark . . . I could not see . . . my eyes were shut the moment before. . . ." She was nearly fainting.

A doctor volunteered his services, and made his way with difficulty to the horror-stricken group.

Gioconda, pale as death, was supporting her father, and mechanically stanching the blood that was flowing from his breast with her already saturated handkerchief. Riccardo had unfastened his stained shirt.

All was confusion. Men were hurrying their wives and daughters out of the opera-house. Two inefficient *sergents de ville* appeared just as the surgeon reached the wounded man, and an innocent Frenchman was forthwith arrested on the representation of interfering bystanders, until his angry friends declared that he had been sitting ten seats away from the spot where the outrage had been committed. Riccardo relinquished his position at Ciccio's side to the surgeon, who rendered what hasty ministrations he could.

"He is dead?" Gioconda asked him in a low voice.

"No, no, not yet," he replied in business-like tones. "This black stone here must have turned the weapon aside from the heart at which it was aimed. But it appears to have grazed, or perhaps entered, the lung. We must get him out of this as soon as possible. Where do you live?"

Gioconda told him.

Salvatore went out to get an ambulance; and as soon as the surgeon had superintended the removal of

the unconscious man, he took a *voiture* to fetch his instruments.

But operation was discovered to be useless. The constant hæmorrhage persisted. A quarter of an hour after he had reached his own house, Ciccio Scarfi regained consciousness, and the priest who had been summoned from the Rue de l'Eglise administered extreme unction. The sick man was unable to speak, but at the close of the sacrament his eyes wandered painfully around the room as if in search of them all. They were all at hand, and the priest moved to the foot of the bed, where he continued to recite prayers on his knees.

"What do you want, papa *carissimo*?" Gioconda asked, leaning over him. But his eyes sought out Annunziata. She came forward, obeying his silent summons, her face swollen with weeping.

He tried weakly to make a gesture, to speak to her. She bent closer to kiss his forehead. His eyes were frantic in his desire to communicate with her. At last his strength was gathered into a supreme effort, and he cried in a hoarse voice which was audible to every one in the room—


"Thou . . . Riccardo . . ."

The exertion was too much for him, and there was a gush of blood from his mouth. He was unable to continue.

Riccardo understood, and crossed quickly to her side. As he took her cold, limp hand the dying man's eyes quivered as if with a smile. Then they closed. Giovanna was avenged of her lover's stolen years of youth.

Annunziata sank weeping by the bed. Riccardo

knelt beside her, with his arm about her convulsed shoulder. Salvatore prayed over his rosary beside the priest, and Gioconda, gently replacing the stained coverlet over the dead man, set burning candles at the head and foot of the bed, and lit, with a taper, the little lamp that hung beneath the image of the Virgin on the wall. Beside it, ever since she could remember, had hung her mother's portrait. As the little red lamp was kindled, she gazed with eyes that ached for want of tears, at the smiling face of the woman whom her father had so loved, and, not knowing, was glad that there was one in Paradise to add her prayers to theirs for the soul that had set out on the long journey.



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PART III

THE VEILED PROPHET

CHAPTER I

CICCIO SCARFI was buried the next day, in accordance with the Tunisian custom, and was followed to his grave by a large number of the Italian and Sicilian residents. The police were unable to discover any trace of the assassin. Apparently he had accomplices, for those sitting by him must not only have refrained from making the least attempt to deliver him up to justice, but must have furthered his escape. The police shrugged their shoulders over the affair. It was another case of the Mafia again, and where the Mafia was concerned, no Sicilian witness could be trusted to give evidence in the witness-box, however little connection he apparently had with the actors in the tragedy.

Gioconda was stunned by the blow, and shed no tears. Annunziata, who during the days which immediately followed the funeral was prostrated by grief, gradually recovered her self-control. She agreed without any demur when Riccardo suggested that their betrothal be made public, but he made no attempt to intrude himself upon her, trusting to time. He contented himself with seeing that neither of the

two girls were burdened with the numerous and unavoidable details and duties which followed the assassination.

Salvatore showed himself in a better light than heretofore, and though he allowed Riccardo to take the lead in arranging his father's affairs, he did what he could to alleviate the situation. There was much to do, much to settle. There was a meeting of the directors of the company; at which, in accordance with the dead man's written wishes, Riccardo was formally appointed general manager in his uncle's stead. Salvatore was well content; he had no wish to be bothered with office matters more than was necessary. The bulk of the shares, representing a by no means inconsiderable yearly income, was left to be divided among Salvatore and the two girls. To Riccardo was bequeathed the remainder of the shares and the management of the business, on the condition that he carried it on as his uncle had done. Ciccio Scarfi was a richer man than any of them had suspected.

San Calogero came up from El-Hathera for the funeral; and soon after his return wrote to Gioconda suggesting that they should all four come down to Kairouan for a change of air and scene. He had seen Madame Perrier of the Hotel Splendide at Kairouan, who, in her kindly letter of condolence, had written to say that she hoped that they would pay a visit to Kairouan under her chaperonage and care for a month.

Riccardo urged Gioconda to go. He was anxious about her health, so altered was her appearance by the strain through which she had passed. Annunziata joined him in begging her elder sister to leave Tunis for a while. She yielded finally to their persuasions,

making the stipulation that Riccardo should come with them for at least a week. He agreed. The office could well spare him for a brief time, and Salvatore, who had not the slightest desire to forsake Tunis, would keep him constantly acquainted with everything that took place day by day.

As the date appointed for their departure drew near, Annunziata's spirits rose. She was too full of youth and vitality not to be able to escape from grief. It was true that every morning she went with her sister to hear a Mass said for her father, and that every morning on her return her face was serious and her eyes reddened, but the afternoon saw her almost her gay self.

They were to start on a Friday in San Calogero's automobile. Giovanni arrived on the Thursday night with Giuseppe and the car, and on the following morning Salvatore saw them off with feelings akin to relief. He had not been on the best of terms with his father, and though his death had shocked him, he had not felt any keen sorrow, and the atmosphere of mourning in the house had made him thoroughly dejected. Concetta accompanied them to the Rue Djazira to wave them a good-bye, and the last thing they saw as they set off was her gay-kerchiefed old head at the street corner. The car had not been able to penetrate the narrow alleys of the Medina quarter.

Gioconda was pale and dark-eyed; Giovanni observed her with inner distress.

It was the first time that either of the two girls had ever travelled in an automobile, and Annunziata kept the good-tempered Giuseppe well amused by her insatiable curiosity about the machinery of the car, and her attempts to drive it under his protecting hands. Even

Gioconda found her heaviness of heart gradually decreasing, as they whirled along the old pilgrim road. Past green fields they sped, past oxen and worn camels toiling side by side at the plough under the guidance of Arab labourers, through the hills by Hamman Lif which guard the Green City; past flat-roofed villages, white and squat, with minarets cutting into the sky, symbols of the faith which has suffered less change since its foundation than any other in the world; past stretches of wild-flowers innumerable; till they stopped for lunch under some olive-trees, gnarled with age, old as the city of Dido itself.

The picnic lunch was a pleasant function. San Calogero and Riccardo picked a bunch of gladioli, yellow daisies, and blue borage, which they stuck into the fork of an overhanging branch, so that the meal was not without decoration. A couple of Arab shepherds guarding their flocks near by, came and leant on their staves to survey the party, and when they were given food thanked Allah and cursed the unbeliever in one breath, the former and latter equally by habit. One of them had a henna-stained flute of five stops, made of bamboo, and on this he played one of the ancient herding tunes that are without beginning and without end, like eternity. They stared at the car as at something of the devil, but a peepshow, nevertheless; and when the devil's thing had started on its way in a cloud of dust and a stink of petrol, they committed themselves once again to Allah, and again cursed the foreigner.

Green fields were soon left behind. The country grew more and more arid and barren as they journeyed southwards. This savage nudity of the hills was almost disquieting. The bare soil, sparsely grown

with grey shrubs, burnt beneath the midday sun as in a brazier; passionate, but with no joy in its passion, like a woman who, beneath the ardent embraces of one lover, thinks, dry-eyed, of another. This was a phase of Africa which Riccardo had not yet seen, and it oppressed him as if it held something personally ominous.

To the shrubs succeeded stretches of scant prairie grass, with here and there the blackened tents of a Bedouin encampment, or a herd of camels, dwarfed by the vastness of the horizon into the semblance of insects. And there was always the white road, flying past them monotonously. Unconsciously they had all lapsed into silence. The presence of great spaces lay upon their spirits. With every mile of the dusty road they were moving southwards to the desert.

A trifling accident to the car delayed them for two hours in this infinite country, where the wind was fresh in spite of the sun and scented with herbs, sweet with the miles it had travelled without barrier. There was something in the width of the horizon, the desolation of the plain, that made the girls talk in lowered voices whilst the men were busy with the car. It was dark before they reached Kairouan, and the two girls, tired out, were only conscious of a big white wall, like the wall of a city in fairyland, of a dimly-lit street crowded with Arabs, of a group of French houses. Then they got out of the car and dined under the motherly eye of Madame Perrier, in company with three German tourists who were discussing the mosques they had visited that afternoon. They stared at the two pretty Sicilian girls as if they were a feature described by the guide-book. San Calogero had gone on to El-Hathera. Riccardo, like his cousins, drowsy with the fresh air, went to bed soon after the meal.

His window he left open, and far into the night he heard the beating of African drums the length of a street away, as if many were beaten together, fiercely; then softly; then monotonously. So regular, so unceasing was this music, however, that it merged into a dream and he slipped into a deep sleep.

A thundering at his door late the next morning aroused him. It was Giovanni.

"I've driven the car over for you. We've had a piece of stupendous luck yesterday—when I was away too, confound it! Hurry up and drink your coffee. Gioconda and Annunziata are down already and preparing to come with me."

Riccardo yawned and sprang out of bed. His excited friend seized his hand.

"You are in fortune! You will see something that princes might envy!"

Some fifteen minutes later, Riccardo went outside, to find his cousins already in the car, talking to San Calogero. They drove past the straggling French houses, miserable in their exile, in the opposite direction from the town, whose white minarets and domes rose above its crenellated walls like a city of the Thousand and One Nights in the clear light of morning. It was dazzling, the spring sunshine blazing on to the road across the dried expanse, half desert, half browned grass. Soon this road became little more than a sandy track, and half an hour of cautious progress across this brought them to a small date plantation, and within sight of what appeared to be a European laying of drain-pipes, protected by one or two tents and a wooden hut. It was the excavating camp. Gioconda, whose enthusiasm had caught fire from Giovanni's, was disappointed. Annunziata cried out—

"Why, it's a rubbish heap! Where is the temple, and the house?"

She was scarcely more satisfied when some broken stumps of columns were pointed out to her, and the obvious foundations of a Roman house, with its room plan, its heating apparatus, and its mosaic floor in the atrium, which had been lightly recovered with sandy earth until it could be transferred piece by piece to the shelter of the museum at the Bardo.

"Why the Bardo?" asked Riccardo.

"Because Si Ismael has offered to pay half the cost of excavation on condition he is allowed to transport it to the Bardo," San Calogero replied, hurrying them along. He did not wish his visitors to delay over the house, he was anxious to show them something of greater importance.

Giovanni addressed himself more especially to Gioconda, and Riccardo found himself walking behind them with his betrothed. He foresaw that this might happen again, and asked himself what his relations with Annunziata really were. He had never kissed her since the time he had stolen an embrace out of pique in the patio soon after her refusal of him.

San Calogero called the foreman, and the latter, an intelligent Arab with sandy hair, led the way up a hill, where the more recent excavations had been taking place. San Calogero explained to Gioconda, as they picked their way over the disturbed earth, that they had never thought of digging at all on the hill; but that during the heavy rains of November, a portion of the hillside slipped away, uncovering a piece of marble veined with blue like the skin of a woman's arm. The Arab had broken it off with a pickaxe and laid it on his ass; a French priest had met him;

hence the whole discovery: a temple and a public building whose character they had not yet been able to decide.

When they had ascended a little higher they saw indeed the bones of a temple, its double row of columns broken short but still *in situ*, its steps worn by worshippers of close on two thousand years ago. There was something of the magnificence of eternity in these silent stones, uncovered once more to the sun, hummed over by African wild bees, lineal descendants of the wild bees which two thousand years back had drunk honey from the sacrificial garlands.

"Is this the great discovery?" asked Gioconda.

"No, not here. This represents the work of weeks. Our treasure trove lies there——" He indicated a fosse farther to the left.

They walked towards it. An excited group of workmen and two men in the white habit of the Pères Blancs stood beside an arrangement of pulleys.

"Here you are, San Calogero! We would not begin until you came," said one of them, a man with a keen scholar's face and pointed beard, as he greeted the little party.

At his invitation, Gioconda peeped into the fosse, and saw what apparently was an earthy lump of marble, half-covered by sacking and ropes.

The pulleys were started at a word of command. They stopped; a rope was giving, or there was some hitch. Again the word was given. The visitors were astonished at the difficulty there seemed to be in hoisting this not very big piece of marble to the surface. The sun poured down on the sweating Arab workmen, the straining ropes, the fresh-turned earth. At last the pulleys slackened the heavy burden lay

on the broken, sandy soil ; matting, sacking, ropes and all. San Calogero's face was illumined like that of a mystic about to behold a vision. Père Dupré was cool ; Père Michaud, a nervous man, almost twitching.

The Arabs burst into exclamations of delight and thanks to Allah.

"Uncover her, uncover her!" cried the Père Michaud.

Père Dupré knelt, and, with San Calogero's help, scientifically cut the thongs and unrolled the sacking, not waiting to untie knots. Before them lay the white but earth-stained body of a nude woman, somewhat conventionalised in form ; flat of breast, and with ringlets of the archaic pattern plastered to the forehead. The feet were broken away, so was one arm ; the other held a fish and some kind of dove clasped against the left breast. The mouth was curved upwards in a smile, secretive, gentle, disdainful. Riccardo had the sudden thought that when Mabrouka smiled beneath her veil, she must wear the same expression.

"*C'est la mère Tanith !*" cried Père Michaud. "*C'est elle-même !*"

And, with the abandon of a devotee, he flung himself on his knees beside the earthy figure with the others.

San Calogero broke away the sandy earth from the temples, the grooves of the breasts, and the sides, with tender fingers that were a caress.

Riccardo was stirred with a shudder of feeling as if the figure had really some connection with Mabrouka. There were the two Christian priests kneeling as if in adoration by the side of the heathen goddess of desire. He looked at Gioconda. Infected by the rest, she was leaning forward with parted lips, and cheeks

tinged with the glow of excitement. Annunziata alone stood apart. Her eyes were fixed, not on the image, but on him. Riccardo met them suddenly, and words she had once uttered came back to him: "That is what all men like . . . the buried, the hidden."

"What is that you said about Si Ismael's offering to transfer the mosaics?" asked Riccardo as they sat at *déjeuner*.

"I said that he had offered to transport any portable discoveries at his own cost to the Bardo. It is a public-spirited offer. But then it was really through him that the excavations were first begun here, some three or four years back. He has made several illuminating suggestions to Père Dupré, who is in charge of the excavations. Si Ismael is of an exceptional intelligence."

Annunziata remarked abruptly: "I saw him outside the hotel this morning, when I got out of bed at six to open the window."

"Surely you were mistaken," Giovanni said. "He is in Tunis, to my certain knowledge."

"I know that I was not mistaken. He has curious eyes."

Riccardo suggested: "He may have come to see the excavations."

"In that case he would have written to Père Dupré or myself, especially as we are sending him a consignment of pottery and the small mosaic floor which you did not see."

"When?" Riccardo asked.

"The cars will come from Tunis this evening. Our foreman is to superintend the loading to-morrow, and they will leave with a special engine to-morrow morning."

Riccardo reflected. "From Tunis?"

"Yes."

"At what time do you think they will arrive?"

"They may have come already."

"He has sent before?"

"Several times."

"The trucks are open or closed?"

Giovanni stared at him with some surprise. "I really do not remember. . . . Open, I believe."

After *déjeuner*, Riccardo remarked to Giovanni: "I'm going up to the station, to see if the trucks have arrived."

"You won't see anything of the freight. It is packed carefully in matting and put into a shed by the railway. Our Arabs will transfer the stuff to the trucks to-morrow."

"I don't want to see the freight. I want to see the trucks."

San Calogero looked puzzled. "My dear Riccardo, you are surely mad."

Riccardo laughed. "It is quite possible. Are you in a great hurry to get back to El-Hathera, or will you walk with me to the station?"

"If you like," Giovanni returned, with a shrug of his shoulders. "We can leave the *signorine*, your cousins? They have not been into Kairouan yet at all, and they cannot go out alone here."

"They will rest till four, as they do at home."

"*Va bene.*"

The two young men started out.

"Your *promessa* is not yet herself," Giovanni remarked suddenly, as they went down the dusty road that led through the French quarter to the station. "She is still quiet—and, for her, melancholy. I

noticed it first to-day. She is less of a child. . . When does your marriage take place?"

"I do not know."

"Madame Perrier told me that it would be soon."

"That was supposition. Annunziata must decide. . . . You must have guessed that this marriage is entirely one of convenience. . . . It was her father's wish. Annunziata was opposed to it from the moment that it was broached. She and Gioconda have not been brought up like most Sicilian girls; their mother's early death made them independent—like Americans."

Riccardo spoke with a certain amount of bitterness.

"But that is what makes them superior to the women at home. You cannot prefer little simpletons who have been systematically prevented by their mothers from ever thinking or acting for themselves?"

Giovanni was thinking more of Gioconda than of Riccardo's betrothed.

"There was no talk of such a preference on my part."

"You seem suited to each other: what imagination is keeping you apart?" Giovanni said, taking Riccardo's arm. "I cannot believe that Annunziata is really against it. . . . She is perverse, perhaps, and needs some wooing. You cannot expect a girl to fall into your lap like a ripe apple directly the tree is shaken. . . ." He broke off, averse to discuss so intimate a topic. "Ah! here we are at the station. Those are the trucks on the siding."

They walked towards them. They were four, and they stood in the empty station into which the fierce sun of midday was beating. An Arab lay asleep in the shade of one of them, and at Giovanni's shout he sprang to his feet.

"Peace to thee! What art thou doing here?" Giovanni asked in Arabic.

"I watch by the trucks, sidi."

"There is no need to watch by empty trucks."

"Si Ismael hath sent some packages to the Cadi of Kairouan, sidi. I wait until they are fetched."

"Ah yes; I remember. Si Ismael wrote to me about them this morning."

He turned and explained to Riccardo.

Riccardo asked: "Can the man understand Italian?"

The watcher shook his head in answer to Giovanni's question.

"Then send him away," Riccardo said in an undertone. "I have a particular reason for wishing to examine these packages which Si Ismael has sent to the Cadi."

"I cannot dismiss the man. He must do his duty. It is nothing to do with me."

"But it is important. Say I am the Customs official."

"The official is a half-caste. He may know him."

"Nevertheless try it."

Giovanni said in Arabic—

"This is the Customs official, oh thou. Show him the packages."

The man looked frightened and sullen. "There is nothing to declare," he said.

San Calogero laughed. "My dear Riccardo, there is no use in making disagreeables. The real official will come by and by, and I shall be in bad odour with Si Ismael. What on earth should Si Ismael send to the Cadi that you want to examine? What business is it of yours or of mine?"

"It may be very much my business. I admit I am

only acting on supposition, and may be entirely wrong. But I would give anything to examine these packages."

"But I shall not dream of interfering unless you can give me a definite reason," Giovanni replied, with impatience.

"There is a definite reason," Riccardo said, "but I am unable to give it. For Heaven's sake, Giovanni, think of some means of opening them."

"If the thing is serious, the police could be applied to"

Riccardo considered. He dared not risk the exposure. If Ciccio's name were dragged into the affair, the reputation of the firm would be ruined. Recourse to the police was the last thing possible. So he replied: "It is not a matter for the police."

San Calogero shrugged his shoulders.

"Then I fail to see what can be done."

Heaven at this juncture suddenly intervened, for the Arab, who had watched their colloquy with growing panic, suddenly gathered his robes together, and fled across the line and up the dusty road as if he were pursued by demons.

Riccardo waited no longer; he jumped on to a wheel, and clambered into the first truck. It was empty, but he saw that there were two packing-cases of considerable size in the next.

Giovanni stared at him, aghast.

"Good God, man, you will be seen!"

"There is no one to see me," Riccardo returned from the inside of the car. He was making an attempt to force one of the boards of the packing-case open, but it did not yield.

"Don't be a madman, Riccardo; we shall get into trouble over this."

Riccardo looked over the side, red and dishevelled. "If they come, you must take an authoritative position. You have only to remind them that these cars were sent for your convenience. You never received the letter from Si Ismael telling you of the packages sent to the Cadi. It is natural that you should wish to examine the packages in these trucks; for all you know they may be of importance to the excavators."

Giovanni drew a breath. "I suppose I could make that explanation, but I do not see what the hell you are doing."

"I can't move the thing," Riccardo said from the interior. "Get a porter if you can. It will lend us an air of being in the right."

Giovanni shouted. But the porters, now that the great event of the day was over,—the advent of the Kalaa-Srira train connecting with the main line,—had retired for the midday siesta. But on the road near by he could see an Arab workman with a mattock on his shoulder.

In answer to Giovanni's call, the man came towards them with alacrity. Work was scarce in Kairouan. When he saw the trucks, however, he hesitated. He would return; he had other things to do first. He and his mattock disappeared.

Giovanni swore.

"If I have to walk to El-Hathera, I'll get some one!"

He rammed his white Panama on his head and went outside. A universal siesta pervaded the ugly little French quarter. The very dogs were stretched, bellies upward, in the scanty shade. One of his own Arabs was walking towards the station, however, and San Calogero hailed him. "*Hola*, Miloud!"

"Sidi!"

"Come to the station. I wish to unfasten one of the packages sent by Si Ismael; it may contain something which he promised to send to me."

Miloud's jaw dropped. "The packages sent by Si Ismael?" he repeated.

"Yes, yes. Hurry thyself."

"It will be difficult, sidi——"

"Don't talk like a fool. Come, and that quickly!"

Miloud came unwillingly, like a sulky child. Then, suddenly, like the first Arab, he took to his heels and ran. San Calogero yelled after him in vain.

He returned. "You are right, Riccardo. There is something odd about this." He took off his coat and waistcoat determinedly. Riccardo did the same. With perspiration oozing from every pore, the two men strained at the heavy wooden cases. They were unable to force them open.

"It is no good attempting anything without tools," Riccardo said, after some minutes, throwing down the piece of iron he had been using as a lever. "This iron is too thick." He had found it at the bottom of the car, where it had been left behind by a careless workman.

"And I would not mind swearing that the cases contain nothing more harmful than blankets and tabulated soups," San Calogero said, sitting with some disgust on the edge of the car.

Riccardo, however, still looked preoccupied.

He vaulted over the side of the truck and stood surveying it closely. Then he tapped the side of the car and measured it with his stick.

"Can't you see!" he cried excitedly.

"Can't I see what?"

Riccardo grew impatient. "*Santa Madonna!* are you blind? These trucks have false bottoms!"

Giovanni looked incredulous.

Riccardo induced him to examine the truck. He struck the bottom. "You can hear for yourself."

"We can't destroy the truck," objected Giovanni.

But Riccardo was already at work. There was a chink in one of the planks at the bottom of the car, and into this he forced his piece of iron. It gave at last with a splitting sound.

He was right. There was a piece of matting underneath it. He put in his hand, and pulled it away. Beneath, a gleam of metal met his eye, the gleam of gun-metal.

"Perhaps you can guess now what is in the cases," he said, turning to Giovanni, who was peering over his shoulder.

"This must be looked into," San Calogero returned, with sudden gravity. "It seems to me that it is a matter for the police after all."

"I tell you that they must be kept out of it at all costs."

"Well, what would you have me do?"

"Simply remove them. It will serve as a warning to those who used the trucks as a convenience, and will prevent these devils from getting the means of destruction which have been so kindly forwarded to them."

"The Cadi may send for these blessed cases any moment."

"I do not fancy that the Cadi will do so after three separate reports have reached him that two Europeans are endeavouring to pry them open. And in any case, he would not attempt to do so until it was dark. The Customs official here must be in their pay."

"What's to be done then?"

"We must return here with proper tools this evening, and workmen upon whom you can rely."

"And leave the cases unguarded?"

"Of course not. One of us had better stay here on guard, unless you have a man who can be trusted."

"There's the foreman," Giovanni said helplessly. "But he must be in connivance, like Miloud."

"How about Giuseppe?"

"Ah, Giuseppe! Thank Heaven he's a Sicilian, bred on my own estate! If I couldn't trust him, I would never trust any one again."

"He is armed?"

"Of course. He will see that nothing is tampered with. But I will prime him up with a story. The station-master and the ticket-collector, being French, will make a fuss if they suspect that anything is wrong."

"I will stay here until he comes," Riccardo returned. "You will fetch him, and let him explain to the station-master that some important consignment has arrived for the camp at El-Hathera, which must not be tampered with by the Customs officials until you are present."

An hour and a half later, Giuseppe, the chauffeur, sat in the shade of the truck on the siding, regarding a low line of green-shuttered houses sweltering in the heat, and dried fields hedged in by prickly pear. Beyond that was brown open country upon which two hobbled camels were feeding. To the right the sun smote on the minarets of Kairouan.

He lit a cigarette, and opened a novel, like a loiterer who found his position comfortable and enjoyed the view.

CHAPTER II

THE Rue Saussier, the ancient Zankat Touila, dozed in the late afternoon sun. A few mules and donkeys, laden with sheepskins full of oil, or bundles of green stuff, and grievously covered with sores, moved along in a cloud of flies with a patience surpassing the patience of Western asses, in accordance with the greater sufferings they are called upon to endure. Mangy camels, likewise sore and fly-ridden, paced dustily by the butchers' shops, the vegetable and fruit vendors and the gay calico booths, with lifted heads and an unholy sneer. Beggars in rags talked together amicably: an old deformed man, sitting in the sun, kept up a constant cry of "*Meskin! meskin!*" and a prayer to Allah the Compassionate, the Merciful. Among them all, a *cafetier* carrying a sheaf of long-handled coffee-pots no bigger than egg-cups, ran nimbly about on his bare legs, giving drink to the faithful.

Suddenly a call, long-drawn and shrill as if from another world, sounded far above. It was taken up by a hundred aerial voices, echoed and re-echoed. Some of the merchants rose from their squatting positions, and shaking their robes, walked gravely in twos and threes to the nearest mosque, one of the hundred and forty of the City of Prayer. Others slipped the beads of their rosaries through their fingers. The beggar continued to cry.

One merchant, a fruit-seller, less pious, came over to his neighbour, a vendor of sweet cakes, and sat down on the strip of grass matting beside him.

"Peace be with thee!"

"To thee be peace!"

The cake-vendor hailed the *cafetier*.

"Two coffees!—*kahowin*."

"It is growing hot," sighed the fruit-merchant. "Soon there will be no more strangers left in the town. No foreigners came to-day from Kalaa-Sriia."

"There are those who dig up yonder, may Allah curse them!" The cake-seller spat over his left shoulder.

"What have they found of new? I heard talk of it in the souk."

"This morning a naked woman, a thing of shame, in marble."

The fruit-vendor listened respectfully. The cake-seller was of holy birth and a theologian.

"Then thou thinkest that such things should be destroyed?"

"Is it not written in the Koran that no image should be made nor suffered. Yet these Christians who profane God daily by the worship of a naked man whom they call by the name of Sidi Eissa, and Mariam his mother whom they call the leman of the Most High, and many others beside, are not content with the images of their own religion but must set up those of another faith!"

"And these are the dogs who enter our mosques and gape at our holy places without let or hindrance!" ejaculated the other piously.

"That thou hast from the Great One?"

"Ay, truly. He has said as much many times."

"Yet thy son earns much in taking these dogs to the

mosques," observed the cake-vendor, with a sudden gleam of humour.

"Should they go and not pay? That were foolishness. But what news of the Great One?"

"He keepeth silence. The time is ever not yet ripe."

"In Morocco they have already done much. Even this morning I read that the Chosen had utterly destroyed the troops of the French."

"How many times hath not the same thing been reported? Heaven worketh not always as swiftly as the lies of the journals."

"Is it true," asked the fruit-vendor, joining in the other's smile, "that the Great One is even now in the city?"

"Thou sleepest late, Mustapha. I have myself spoken with the Two-Faced this morning. In passing he gave me seven dates, and calling me by name bade me eat three myself and give the other four to any one whom I counted a trusty friend, and that this would bring me good fortune."

"Thou art indeed favoured," said the other, somewhat enviously. "To whom didst thou give the four?"

The cake-vendor hesitated, and said in a shame-faced way, "I gave the four to Aziza, the dancing-girl."

"Ah, it is there that thou needest fortune then," the fruit-seller exclaimed slyly. "May Allah prosper thee!"

But the other, his coffee cooling meanwhile, prepared to turn to Mecca, and Mustapha, infected by his pious example, drew his rosary off his neck and also repeated the words of the prayers.

At about the same hour, San Calogero and the three Sicilians were walking through the bazaars. Unlike

those of Tunis, they are built in completely, so that the luxurious twilight is profounder, the air cooler, the perfumes stronger. The souks were in gala trim in honour of the feast of Mouled, the anniversary of the day upon which the camel-driver prophet was born. Yellow and white and magenta coloured silks and rich carpets were draped over the booths, completely hiding the masonry. The proprietors themselves wore dresses of exquisite hues, while coloured lamps and glass chandeliers promised illumination as soon as dark had fallen.

There was none of the wealth of Tunis here, but it was all novel to the strangers, and San Calogero, who was well known to some of the merchants, was invited by one to sit down on the fine carpet with him and to partake of coffee and perfumed pastries.

Gioconda conversed with him in easy Arabic. San Calogero was amused by the equal condescension of host and guests.

"These people hate us, even when they appear most friendly," he observed to Riccardo, *sotto voce*. "The friendliness is as man to man, but the hatred is as race to race."

A sudden touch on his shoulder interrupted him, and he turned round. One of his Arab workmen stood behind him; his eyes dilated, sweat on his face. He bent down to Giovanni's ear.

"Sidi! come quickly!"

"What is it?"

The Arab gave a hasty look around him. In all the booths in the honeycombed street sat shop proprietors, smoking, sipping coffee together, playing dominoes, or reading the Koran. A peaceful hum of conversation, a delicate scent filled the place.

"I cannot tell thee all here. Come, sidi! Come at once. It is necessary!"

Giovanni looked at him with veiled suspicion. "What is it, son of an owl? Am I to run without reason?"

The Arab bent closer to his ear and whispered in it. Giovanni's face did not change, but he rose.

"Forgive me for hurrying away," he said, addressing Gioconda and Annunziata; "but I'm afraid that Riccardo and I shall have to take you back to the hotel . . ."

In spite of his casual manner, the girls instantly divined that something was wrong. Rising, they made their farewells to their host, who accepted them with the languid grace of a society woman.

"You have had bad news?" Gioconda asked, as soon as they were walking out in the open again.

"Nothing of importance; a little dispute between one of my workmen and the authorities. I have to go to settle it. I feel sorry to chase you indoors again so soon. But we can go out to-night and see the illuminations. Kairouan illuminated is a very pretty sight."

He talked on for the sake of talking.

Behind them Annunziata said, with a touch of sarcasm, "I am not to know what has happened?"

"I don't know myself," Riccardo replied, "so that I could scarcely share my ignorance with you."

His tone was cool, but he felt resentment at her words.

"Riccardo," she began in an unexpectedly softened voice, "we should at least be friends, should we not? I know that I am often horrid to you, but it is unintentional."

"I have scarcely had opportunity of judging what your particular moods may be," he replied bitterly.

She looked at him, and surprised him by the sudden sweetness and depth in her eyes.

"You mean—we—have not been alone?"

"I mean that you avoid me on every possible occasion."

"I am sorry, Riccardo. . . . It has been my fault. . . . Shall we make a compact of friendship then?"

Riccardo smiled involuntarily. "It would be pleasanter than this armed truce."

"It is peace then."

"Yes, it is peace." He took the little hand she offered him, and on impulse retained it. She permitted the liberty.

"After all," she said, "it is a little senseless, as we are to be married."

He pressed her hand with sudden passion.

She raised her eyebrows and smiled. Then she broke out after a while with a sigh: "Marriage is such an important kind of thing, isn't it?"

He glanced at her. "I should think it was."

"Especially with us. Now, the Arabs divorce each other whenever they please. As we sat talking to that man in the souks just now, I wondered if he loved two women. He has two wives, you know. I wonder if he really loves both of them. Or whether they love differently. Do you think it possible for any man to love two women at the same time, Riccardo?"

"I don't like to hear you discussing such things," he exclaimed, with the repugnance every male creature

feels at hearing foreign sentiments from the lips of a woman who is more or less his property.

"I don't think it would be possible for a woman to love two men at once, somehow," she continued, unperturbed; and went on reflecting in silence, one arm still in his, the other hand supporting her sunshade.

"Riccardo——" she began.

He waited.

"Never mind. I will tell you some other time. Here we are at the hotel."

Riccardo had almost forgotten that there was work of some gravity ahead. Yet when the two girls were again inside, Giovanni set off at a brisk pace towards the station, followed always by the Arab, who had become apathetic again.

"What has happened?"

"There is trouble of some sort at the station, it seems. Giuseppe despatched this Arab to fetch me."

They hurried along in silence; but as they neared the station were greeted by a babel of voices. The commotion centred about the gate, where a dilapidated carriage drawn by a grey Arab mare was in attendance. At the gate was a group of some ten or eleven gesticulating persons, in which Arab robes and European coat-tails were indiscriminately mixed.

"It is the carriage of M. le Cadi," said their messenger in an impressive tone.

"Stop one moment, for God's sake, Giovanni!" Riccardo pleaded hastily, taking his friend by the arm. "We have to think upon a plan of action."

"The simplest plan," retorted Giovanni, "would be to expose the whole piece of villainy to the police."

"I tell you we mustn't challenge an inquiry,"

Riccardo said frantically. "More people are implicated in this than you would think. I can't explain yet, but, as you value the happiness of Gioconda and Annunziata, this must be kept out of the hands of the police."

"But supposing these trucks had been examined between here and Tunis? I should have been in a suspicious position. Something must be done or said."

"Something *shall* be done. But for the present we should be acting criminally if we allowed this stuff to pass into the hands of the disaffected Mahommedans. . . . You must say that the cases contain ammunition sent from Tunis to the excavating camp in view of its unprotected position and the troubled state of the district."

"Claim them as ours? But the number! There must be eighty rifles alone, twenty in each truck."

"We are not concerned with the rifles. How is the station-master to know that the cars have false bottoms? We can return and unload them to-night. . . . Come, we must hurry."

As they approached the group, the agitated *chef de gare*, accompanied by a still more agitated officer of the *douane*, detached themselves from the others and rushed towards the two Sicilians.

"Monsieur le Marquis! this matter requires your explanation! Monsieur le Cadi here says that these cases were sent by Si Ismael to him, and brings a letter to prove his words. Your man declares the cases belong to the camp at El-Hathera, and that they must not be removed until you have given consent."

The Cadi, an enormously stout man with a monumental turban, indorsed the station-master's words in heated but faulty French, and a chorus of explanations

followed from the whole group, all speaking together, each at the top of his voice.

As soon as there was a lull, Giovanni said—

"I am sorry to dispute the matter with Monsieur le Cadi, but I also was anticipating the arrival of packages from Tunis by these same trucks, and see by the size and general appearance of them that the cases before us are undoubtedly those I had hoped to see."

"Monsieur has no letter to prove his words," puffed the Cadi, triumphantly brandishing that document.

"My word is sufficient for Monsieur le Chef, I should hope," Giovanni said, turning to the station-master. But that worthy appeared doubtful. In his mind there was not much to choose between a Sicilian marquis and an Arab cadi.

The Customs official, a shifty-looking half-caste, proclaimed his partisanship with the Cadi.

"The Cadi has it in black and white," he said truculently. "If Monsieur le Marquis has a letter to confirm his statement, all will be well."

"I have a letter, certainly, but it would be an inconvenience to fetch it from El-Hathera." He addressed himself to the Cadi. "Perhaps Monsieur le Cadi would be so obliging as to tell me what his cases contain?"

The Cadi was not unprepared for the question.

"Garments and books," he said readily, his beady eyes blinking above his mountainous cheeks. "Si Ismael out of his piety has sent these to be divided among the poor scholars of the *zaouia* of the Mosque of the Barber."

"The charity of Si Ismael is well known," remarked the Customs officer, with some unction.

Giovanni smiled. "The matter appears to me

perfectly simple," he said smoothly. "The cases which I expected contained ammunition for our camp at El-Hathera. The district has been reported unsafe, and the authorities, at my instance, have sent us the means of defence. There is no need for further discussion. As soon as the cases are opened, it will be apparent to whom they belong."

"I object," cried the Cadi, his face purpling with rage. "This is an insult to Si Ismael, and an insult to myself."

"Softly, softly!" soothed the station-master. "The proposition of Monsieur the Marquis seems reasonable. The cases are in any event liable to be opened by the officer of the Customs."

"That is true," said Giovanni. "The Cadi can make no objection to such a plan."

"The Cadi's oath is sufficient," blustered the Customs officer. "Neither the clothes nor the books are dutiable."

"Monsieur le Chef, I must ask you to insist that the cases be opened."

"I have no authority, monsieur."

"If that is so, I shall apply to those who have."

The Customs officer shrugged his shoulders. It was evident that he was already more than a little scared by the affair.

"If M. le Marquis insists, I will open the cases."

The Cadi looked on in pitiable distress.

"There is nothing dutiable in them. I have here the letter of Si Ismael to prove what I say. They contain garments and books, books and garments."

"That remains to be seen," said Giovanni. "I do not doubt the sincerity of your assertion, M. le Cadi; but it is a matter of importance to me that the contents

of the cases should be proved to belong to either you or me."

"Monsieur le Marquis has reason," added the station-master, placing his thumbs in his buttonholes.

"I am willing to open the cases," said the Customs official sullenly; "but——"

"My advice to you is to open them," Giovanni observed, brushing some dust from his shoulder in a casual manner. "I hear that there is dissatisfaction in some quarters with the manner in which your duties are performed."

This piece of bravado had the desired effect. The man took his lever, and, after a considerable amount of effort, succeeded in partially opening the case.

The station-master, with the air of an arbiter, looked over his shoulder.

"Aha, books!" he exclaimed suddenly.

There was an immediate sensation. The drooping Cadi pulled himself together, the Customs officer lost his craven look.

Giovanni was at a loss.

But Riccardo, who was kneeling beside the case, put in his hand hastily and drew out the volume—a parchment bound Koran. In he thrust his hand once again.

"These are no books!" he cried, bringing a cardboard box to light.

The station-master opened the box gingerly, and returned to give the open case a more thorough examination.

There was a breathless silence.

"M. le Marquis is right," he said, lifting his head in a puzzled manner. "But why, then, is the surface covered with Korans?"

"With the rumours of disloyalty, Monsieur le Chef, it is not wise to advertise the passage of such freight."

"That is true," murmured the station-master, with a look of perspicacity. "These Arabs are not to be trusted."

"It is useless to open the other cases," said the Customs official, with lowered brows. "I am satisfied."

"Every one is satisfied," Giovanni added cheerfully. "I hope, Monsieur le Cadi, that your boxes of books and garments for the poor students will arrive in due course."

The defeated Cadi got into his carriage, his face blanched beneath its layers of fat. The little crowd melted away.

Riccardo and Giovanni congratulated the station-master, who was conscious that he had played the rôle of Solomon in a difficult matter; and, followed by the relieved Giuseppe, walked away from the station after placing the cases in the station-master's care. The sun was setting, and the railway lines shone like liquid fire. The white buildings in front of them became reddened as if with a stain.

"The light is the colour of blood to-night, signore," said Giuseppe, observing it. "We shall have weather like a furnace."

To Riccardo the words seemed pregnant with ill-omen, but he spoke lightly.

"You did splendidly, Giovanni."

"The question is now about the trucks," Giovanni returned.

"Giuseppe's help will hardly be sufficient. Have you no Christian among your workmen at El-Hathera?"

"One. A Maltese."

"You would know where to find him?"

"Easily, I think. Giuseppe and I will fetch him in the car."

"It will be dark before you return. It will cause less suspicion if we go after dinner, all four of us, with the car. It will mean several journeys, even then."

The three men parted outside the hotel. The sky was already darkening; the translucent green and rose of sunset had vanished, and the afterglow does not linger in the South. Riccardo went to find his two cousins, but only Annunziata met him in the hall.

She smiled at him gaily. "Gioconda is not down yet—she is changing her dress."

"Let us go up to the salon, then," he said, taking possession of her. She hesitated, but yielded.

The room, with its parrot-coloured woodwork, was almost dark. Riccardo drew her to him and kissed her.

"You meant that—about the compact of friendship?" he said.

She made no answer, nor did she withdraw. For a moment she remained in his arms, silent with an abandon which surprised him. Was this the schoolgirl who only a short while ago had struggled so indignantly with him in the patio? He kissed her repeatedly, taken off his feet by his discovery of her new submission. But she broke away with a stifled cry.

"Don't, Riccardo! I can't bear it."

Her eyes were full of tears.

"What is it?" he asked, placing one arm round her and leading her to the window. She sank into the chair he pulled forward for her; and Riccardo switched on the electric light.

"Tell me," she said, in quite another voice, "is everything right again? What was it?"

He smiled. "Merely a little argument between Giuseppe and the *douane*. A nothing."

"They didn't fight, I hope?"

"Nothing as violent as that."

"I am so glad. I had a premonition that something disagreeable was about to happen. I am like *la mamma* in that way. Papa used to say that she had marvellous premonitions about things that were going to happen. It is because of San Niccolò di Bastiagnini, our ancestor."

"It is something to have a saint in one's ancestry!" Riccardo laughed. "According to that, I too should have premonitions."

"Ah, but you are not fair! Saint Niccolò transmitted the gift of prophecy to his fair descendants, *la mamma* said."

"With the gift of prophecy went the gift of beauty then," he said, looking at the glory of her golden head, and the outline of her lifted chin.

She coloured, then sighed. "I wish I had known my mother."

"Has the premonition of evil passed away yet?" Riccardo asked lightly, sitting down upon the arm of her chair.

She considered. "No, I do not think that it has. I feel that there is danger."

He laughed, and passed his arm round her reassuringly, as he had done the night her bird had died.

Night had fallen, and three men crossed the lines of the silent station, leaving the car at a little distance on the road to El-Hathera with Giuseppe. The Maltese

clambered into the truck from which the cases had been taken, and by gouging up one of the narrow planks he succeeded in increasing the opening already made in the flooring, but, putting his hand into the aperture, groped into air.

"I can feel nothing. Yes—now I feel the bottom."

Another plank was removed, and this time, by lying on his stomach, he was able to thrust his arm into the false bottom.

"There is nothing, signori."

He wiped the perspiration from his brow, for the night was sultry.

Giovanni jumped in beside him. Even the matting had been removed. The space was empty.

"Try the next."

The next truck was attacked like the first. It also contained nothing but a few wisps of straw. So did the third; so did the fourth.

Riccardo examined the trucks closely, and uttered a soft exclamation of discovery. "Good God, Giovanni, we are confounded fools! These false bottoms are pulled out from the side, like drawers. Here is the oily streak—they worked noiselessly. They have been before us."

The victory was not theirs, after all.

There was nothing for it but to return, and accordingly a ten-franc note was slipped into the hand of the Maltese workman.

"Good-night, signori," said the man, wondering what the pother was about. Giovanni and Riccardo walked slowly towards the car in the direction of the city wall. Every minaret was pricked out in golden light like a fleet on a gala night, and a bonfire flickered just outside the city, casting a glare on the solid surface of the

walls. A young Arab in rose-coloured silk overtook them as they went, accompanied by a woman closely veiled in a black haik. He was probably on his way to visit his friends in the souks, by this time lit with a thousand lamps and crowded with holiday-makers like himself. The woman was obviously old, perhaps his mother, whom he was dutifully escorting to a neighbour's house. Silver anklets clanked on her withered ankles.

"Good-night," said Giovanni, as they reached the car. "I shall be with you early to-morrow morning."

But for a moment, after he had bidden Giovanni good-night, and had watched the lamps of the car race out of sight along the road to El-Hathera, Riccardo stood listening, with the music of remembrance in his heart, to the clink-clink of the *khal-khal* on an old woman's feet as she hobbled wearily after her son.

CHAPTER III

RICCARDO felt as if he could not go to bed, and remained in the salon long after he had bidden his cousins good-night, thinking profoundly. Then, putting on his hat again, he sallied out into the fresh air. The events of the day certainly offered sufficient resistance to his mental digestion. Dare he expose his discovery to the police after all? He could not risk the disaster which it might entail to himself and his cousins. He burnt with anger against Si Ismael. Again, should he share his knowledge with Giovanni? He decided that he could not. It was not fair to the dead man to tell the story of his treachery to a stranger; moreover, now that Giovanni's eyes had been opened as to Si Ismael's unscrupulousness, he could be trusted to take care of himself.

He found himself strolling towards the lighted city, and entered at the massive gate called by the natives the Bab Djelladin, the principal entrance on this side. From the Zankat Touila he turned into the souks, the only European except for a few French soldiers. The covered maze of booths glittered and twinkled with lights like an underground palace in the *Arabian Nights*, and was crowded with turbaned and scarlet-fezzed figures as unmodern as the Bible itself. He pushed his way through to a spot from which the strident din of singing and drums proceeded, and,

elbowing into the thick of a throng of Arabs, he saw a number of youths, about forty or so strong, sitting round a carpeted space. In the centre of the carpet was an ancient brass lamp in which something sweet-smelling was burning. Each of the sitting youths had a bendir of sheepskin stretched over a wooden frame, and this was lifted at intervals above their heads and struck in unison with deafening noise. Between whiles the bendirs were lowered, and tattooed by the fingers to the rhythm of a chant which bore resemblance to the psalms Riccardo had heard in the cathedral at Palermo during Lent. The sight interested him, but he was soon conscious of the scowls cast upon him from this side and that, and moved farther into the rear of the crowd. All the youths but one were silent now, and the soloist was singing long phrases and roulades in a high alto, swaying backwards and forwards as he did so. Then came a clash of bendirs again, and the whole circle of singers joined in chorus.

Riccardo was curious to learn what the performance might be, but his question to an Arab standing beside him elicited no reply, save a haughty lifting of the corner of the robe nearest to the stranger. One man's rebuff is another's opportunity. A villainous-looking Jew, who declared himself to be a guide, pushed forward and explained in a species of mosaic French that it was the Soulamia.

"What are they?"

The Jew informed himself from a neighbour, who grudgingly answered his questions.

"They are the children of Sidi Abdesslem, those who can touch fire and not be burned. They are similar to the Eissowa. Monsieur has been to the Mosque of the Eissowa?"

"No"

"I will be pleased to take monsieur on the next Friday which is the holy day Mussulman. The Eissowa are the children of Sidi Eissa, same prophet as your Jesus Christ. They eat glass, they cut themselves in the body without hurt. My terms per day are five francs, monsieur, I show you everything."

"Thanks, I am not sight-seeing."

"Kairouan—most interesting city."

Riccardo vouchsafed no reply.

"Yes," continued his informant, not to be repressed, and pushing closer; "the Soulamia, they learn verses from the Koran, and after they have repeat many times, the fire not able to hurt them. These men here, they pass a lighted torch under their clothing and not be hurt. So they say, monsieur. It is much ignorance."

Riccardo turned on his heel, only to be followed by the persistent Jew, who earned money in the tourist season, and was not going to let an occasion slip.

Unable to get away from the buzz of his requests to know at which hour he should wait at the hotel the next morning, Riccardo at length wheeled round and bade him go to Gehenna or any other place of torment he might prefer. Discomfited, the Jew left him, murmuring sulkily; and Riccardo pursued his way unmolested through the lighted souks, with their maze of vaulted streets, one leading into another, each full of the glow of lamps, of tapestries, and of Arabs in festal dress. Finally he sat down in a small Arab coffee-house, and ordered himself a cup of the thick, sweet beverage.

It had not cooled many minutes before the thud of approaching drums reached him. He wondered if the Soulamia were going to honour this quiet little byway;

but, as the sounds came nearer, a noisy crowd appeared at the farther end of the souk in which he was sitting, with torches, drums, and a following of ragamuffins. The Arabs in the café got up and went to the entrance to watch its approach. It neared.

In the centre of the crowd walked a man of rather more than middle height, dressed in green. It was to him that all eyes were directed; he appeared to be in some sort of command. Opposite the café, he signed for a halt. The crowd came to a standstill, surging around him and uttering cries. The Arabs who had been drinking coffee beside Riccardo pushed their way to him, and, stooping, lifted his robe to their lips. He was obviously a marabout, or holy man, and the proprietor of the coffee-house, who a moment before had brewed Riccardo's cupful, rushed to him, fell at his feet, and burst into a torrent of speech. The marabout bent and raised him, apparently asking him some questions, while the boys who were beating the bendirs burst into a wild chant. Presently the proprietor passed again through the crowd, who parted to make a road for him, and went into the interior of his shop, reissuing after a few moments with a child in his arms, a pretty boy of about seven. The little face was white with a deathly pallor, and blue veins showed under the transparent skin. One wasted arm hung over his father's shoulder, but his eyes, which were black and unnaturally bright, were fixed with a look of unmistakable terror upon the green-clad figure towards which his father was bearing him. When he was placed into the marabout's embrace, the boy uttered a scream of fright like a trapped animal.

It was then that Riccardo saw the marabout's face, and recognised the cold blue eyes of Si Ismael in their

sunken sockets. For a moment their glances met, the child moaning with fear meanwhile in Si Ismael's arms. Then Si Ismael bent over the boy, and passed one hand caressingly over the length of the emaciated little body. Hardly a movement was made. The chant was hushed, and an extraordinary stillness fell over the souk. The little creature's sobs ceased, he gazed as if fascinated into Si Ismael's face, his black eyes unblinking. Against himself, Riccardo felt a torpor creeping over him; he watched with the same suspense as that which held the crowd. All this endured for about fifteen seconds, then, with a relaxation of attitude. Si Ismael handed the boy back to the *cafetier*. The child looked dazed, and his shrill, babyish voice sounded out questioningly. But there was an unmistakable change in his appearance, the subtle change that distinguishes the convalescent from the dying. The colour was coming back into his cheeks; there was less weakness in the drooping arm.

The onlookers burst into a prolonged shouting, and, pressing about the marabout, tore off portions of his *djebba*, kissing his slippers in a frenzy and grovelling on the ground as if intoxicated. Riccardo fancied that a faint look of disgust crossed Si Ismael's face. One old man near Riccardo burst into feeble weeping, another rushed away through the souk like a madman, screaming at the top of a high treble.

Absorbed in what he saw, Riccardo sat still, until he felt a hand upon his shoulder, and, starting back, saw the coppery face of a mulatto in a dirty fez close to his own.

"You follow," he said in almost incomprehensible jargon. "The marabout wish speak."

Riccardo's first instinct was to take no notice of the fellow, but on second thoughts he rose. Again he

hesitated, and drew out his watch. It was already past two o'clock.

"You come—*fissa, fissa*" (quick), said the negro anxiously.

"Go on," Riccardo answered.

The negro led him out of the souks and into the fresh night air of an open street again. It was almost deserted, and unlit except for starlight. It was not easy to keep up with his swift, swinging gait; he stalked on ahead, down turning after turning; and Riccardo fingered the revolver which he had taken the precaution of slipping into his pocket, resolved not to be taken unawares if there should be treachery about. But the fellow halted at last in a high-walled, narrow alley, before a low-built house, the door of which possessed three knockers, two above and one below, the latter apparently to accommodate children who could not reach the higher level. Here he knocked, and, following him, Riccardo found himself admitted, for the first time, into an Arab house. The entrance-room, which he was able to examine cursorily by the light of an oil-lamp held by the servant who opened to them, was richly tiled and stuccoed. He was conducted into the courtyard, and from thence into a room separated from the open air only by an embroidered curtain. The servant, a mulatto wearing a heavily embroidered coat like a livery, indicated a cushioned divan in one of the T-shaped recesses of the room and a hubble-bubble pipe, and retired, to reappear a moment later with a cup of coffee on a silver tray. It was perfumed with the essence of carnation, and the room itself was pervaded by a subtle odour as if of the memory of flowers rather than of the flowers themselves. The very carpet seemed impregnated with it.

Riccardo did not smoke, but he drank the coffee slowly. An hour passed, or what seemed like an hour, and he was still alone. He began to grow uneasy, and to name himself a fool for coming. Suppose he were to be detained in this polite prison, who would be the wiser as to his whereabouts?

A footfall on the paving of the courtyard without broke these unpleasant surmisings, he held his breath to listen. They approached the place where he was sitting.

"Good evening," said Si Ismael in the doorway. "I must apologise for the lateness of my arrival. I was detained."

Riccardo made up his mind to play the game in the same spirit as that shown by his opponent. The desire to sleep, which had been heavy upon him during the long waiting, left him; as did his momentary misgiving.

"Your coffee was too excellent to make me regret waiting."

"You will have another cup?"

"No, thanks."

Si Ismael entered, and, sitting on the divan opposite to Riccardo, rolled a cigarette between his thin fingers.

"I am afraid," began his guest, "that we caused the Cadi a little annoyance this afternoon. I trust that the poor students of the *saouia* will not suffer by the loss of the Korans. You, Si Ismael, as their benefactor, would regret it."

Si Ismael betrayed no surprise. His eyes were still fixed on the cigarette, upon which he was dropping a fluid out of a long, thin bottle. A single drop sufficed. He replaced the stopper in the bottle with deliberation, and lit the cigarette. It exhaled a curious scent.

"You will not find the air of the station very salubri-

ous, I fear," he said. "Nor is breaking up railway trucks in the heat of the day an entirely safe occupation."

The two eyed one another. Both had the alert look of duellists about to cross swords.

"It is also not altogether without risk to invite the attention of the police."

"It would surely be equally dangerous for Scarfi et Cie. to advertise its connection with such an affair? The reputation of the company with the Government would suffer."

"It is for that reason that the representative of the firm has decided that it shall have a clean slate in future."

Si Ismael made no reply, and Riccardo's pent-up wrath burst its bonds. He leant forward with clenched teeth, his eyes alight with hatred.

"There is at least one member of that firm who will never forget the dirty betrayal of Ciccio Scarfi; who will never forget that Si Ismael was his virtual murderer!"

Si Ismael smiled. "But, as it happens, Ciccio Scarfi's death came as a surprise to this Ismael."

"You—you who betrayed him to the Mafia—can lie to my face . . ." Riccardo cried.

"You are mistaken," Si Ismael said, speaking with directness and simplicity. "The Mafia knew nothing of his treachery. The man who stabbed Ciccio Scarfi was the man whom he had wronged."

"The man whom he had wronged," Riccardo repeated, staggered in spite of himself by Si Ismael's assurance of manner.

Si Ismael opened the leathern case which he carried in his sash, and drew out of it, after some examination of the various papers which it contained, a small newspaper cutting. He handed it to Riccardo.

It was from a Roman paper, and the date was May 10th.

"Escape of a Convict," he read. "Early yesterday morning the escape of Caltinisetta, the mafioso who so cleverly murdered Senator Antonelli sixteen or seventeen years ago, was reported from the prison at X. The case was a *cause célèbre* at the time, owing to the high social position held by the criminal in Sicily. It is thought that influential friends have probably helped him to leave Italy."

"But Caltinisetta never knew," Riccardo gasped.

"The Signora loved him," Si Ismael said tersely. "Do you think that she never communicated with him after his capture?"

"But *she* never knew!"

Si Ismael shrugged his shoulders. "A woman does not always learn from the lips."

Riccardo remained for some moments in silence. In spite of himself he believed this strange man.

At length Si Ismael spoke again, in a different tone of voice.

"Are we not fencing over an imaginary difference?" he asked, speaking in level tones. "Why should we be at enmity? For my part I have felt interest in you from the moment when I met you first—passing Carthage, you remember? To begin with, you were good-looking, and beauty attracts me. Next, you had an air of being truthful, and truth is an eccentricity which pleases me. Lastly, you were intelligent, a rarity; and you have a natural predisposition for, and interest in, my people and my country. You Sicilians have a little of our blood. You are a proud people: you are a conquered people. There is every

reason why there should be friendship and alliance between us. I do not speak of the dirty scum, the bastards of all nations, who crowd Palermo and Little Sicily in Tunis; I speak of patricians like yourself. Your ancestor in the eleventh century, if I remember, was the natural son of Ahmed Ben Diaf, a powerful sheikh who settled in Palermo. That is as may be. Besides that, you call yourself a philosopher; there can, then, be no obstacles between us in the way of religious fanaticism."

He paused. Riccardo made no remark. The curtain in the doorway moved a little as if it were shaken by a draught, and Riccardo fancied he heard a sigh of infinite sadness. Without a word Si Ismael went to the curtain and, pulling it aside, looked out. His tall figure, outlined sharply against the dim starlight and darkness seemed more impressive in the long green robes than in the Western dress. There was something majestic about his scriptural appearance which revived in the young Sicilian a kind of odd reverence. He reminded himself sharply that the man was both a charlatan and a rebel.

After several moments Si Ismael dropped the curtain, and, returning, seated himself again upon the divan. His eyes were gentle and melancholy.

"There is, on the contrary, every reason why we should be allies. There will be more reason yet. I have knowledge of certain spots in the mountains where an ambitious person might be able to dig and find other things beside stone images and Phœnician pottery. The riches of Carthage did not spring entirely from commerce, nor was she likely to disclose all her secrets to the conquering race. Wealth means much to so young a man as yourself. To me, who

am already old, it is no more than the means to an end."

He paused once more, but this time there was absolute silence except for the yelping of a jackal somewhere outside the city.

"I have found the vessels of Scarfi et Cie. of service, of even more service than Ciccio Scarfi guessed. You have rightly surmised that I require concealed transport wherever it is possible between Marseilles, Sousse, Tunis, and here. You can be infinitely useful to me. I have a scheme by which the difficulty of the Customs can be reduced until the danger is rendered negligible. Here is the practical basis for my friendship as well as the pleasure which I have in your society, just as you will find that I can also provide you with practical reasons for yours which will compensate you for the precautions which it would be necessary to take."

"And if I refuse?"

"Why refuse? Your reasons against it can only be trivial. The risk incurred will, with my protection, be small. You owe no loyalty to a Government with which yours was quarrelling badly a generation back. Your personal animosity toward me will be found, I hope, to evaporate, as it usually does after we have been a little while together."

He smiled gently.

Riccardo fluctuated between resentment and the hypnotic fascination which the man's personality exerted over him.

"You cannot imagine that I should consent to such a scheme, a scheme that would not only bring risk to myself, but to the company whose interests I represent. But all this is useless talk. You offer me certain visionary or genuine advantages. What guarantee

have I that you are even able to carry out your word?"

"You shall satisfy yourself. Meantime—here is an earnest."

He rose noiselessly, and, unlocking a heavy box painted in gilt and green in an elaborate Persian pattern, he unlocked it, and placed his hand into one recess. Then, returning, and reseating himself, he held out his hand. A large lump of silver ore reposed on his palm.

Riccardo took it and toyed with it curiously, then returned it.

"There is still the question of discovery."

"Ciccio Scarfi was never discovered."

"My uncle's life was a burden to him long before it was ended."

"It need not have been, had he had the courage, the spirit, the clear-sightedness necessary for such a task as his. But he acted from fear, not reason. As he had betrayed his friend, so he betrayed himself. He did nothing with his whole soul. These are the people whose lives are always a burden."

His eyes were mild, his tone suave. Again Riccardo felt his convictions wavering. Had Ismael delivered Ciccio Scarfi over to the Mafia, or had he not? What proof had he beyond the bare word of this fanatical intriguer? He called up his sleeping hatred, and was aware that the odd being who watched him opposite, with the intentness and calmness of a chess-player, inspired him with an emotion that was almost superstitious. "Am I afraid of him?" Riccardo asked himself, surprised.

There was a silence between them again. The night was very still, and a wind fresh from the bare

plains and sweet with the star-time before the dawn, stirred the curtains for a second time, but Si Ismael made no movement towards them.

He continued to speak, but in a lower tone.

"In a few years a great game will be played, a game worth the playing. . . . Upon whose side will God be, do you think? Upon the side of the cursing, low-living, unbelieving foreigner? Upon the side of the wine-bibbers, the despoilers? Will He not rather be upon the side of those who have kept their religion undefiled and their hearts as the hearts of children? Have they not been elected to receive this religion, they above all nations of the earth? Was it to those who dwell in houses and build themselves great ships that the Chosen Prophet, the Messenger of God, was sent? Was he not sent rather to those who live in tents and whose wants are few even as their faith is great. There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His Prophet—Mohammed, the camel-driver, the poor. . . . I speak this with the wisdom of the West in my heart as well as the wisdom of the East. The Christ of the Christians says, 'By their works ye shall know them.' What are the works of these Christians? Their warships? Their Trusts? Their drunkards? What doctrines have they given to their Christ? Which of even those doctrines do they observe? . . . There are signs—there are many signs—that this false civilisation of Christianity shall be swept away, and that, perhaps, before your hair is grey. . . . Act with us, be with us. You have been chosen, do not turn aside"

Riccardo saw a new Si Ismael. He was no longer the polite duellist, but a fanatic speaking the words which came hot from his heart, burning-hot from the fire of a distorted belief.

"Act with us," Si Ismael repeated vehemently.

"I cannot. I tell you it is impossible."

Si Ismael remained immobile for a moment. Then he added: "You might find it possible if—other—reasons were given you."

The menace rekindled Riccardo's enfeebled hostility. He felt himself able to throw off the shackles which Ismael's magnetism had imposed on his reason. A revulsion came upon him. He and this man were aliens in blood, aliens in creed. The West for the West, and the East for the East, and the great gulf fixed between! Words sprang to his lips without difficulty.

"No fresh argument, nor threat either, can shake my decision. You have reasoned with me, I will give you reason too. You can never infuse life into your corpse. Your race is a dead race; it will never live again. You will fight for its resurrection in vain. Your struggle is doomed from the outset. You are a dreamer, a self-deceiver, a charlatan. I should be a madman to ally myself in any way with a scheme which has failure written across it from the beginning. I should be worse than mad to go against my own race-feeling, my own religion. Christianity is not only a religion, it is progress. Mohammedanism arrests progress: it is a decay. I am not a Christian in one sense, but I am a child of the progress which it has brought—as you are too—you who are fighting for the dead, Si Ismael. I shall fight for the living!"

He waited for an answer, but Si Ismael was voiceless. He lifted his hand, as if to blast, by an unspoken imprecation, the younger man who had insulted his religion, and as if the mere raising of the hand could wither him. Riccardo met the gesture without

flinching, and watched a shadow creep gradually over the Arab's face, the shadow of a haunting doubt, the shadow of a great hate. For the moment he looked haggard. The light of the lamp had grown low, which lent an added darkness to the hollows under his eyes. His hand fell, slowly, nervelessly.

"For . . . the . . . dead," he repeated, as if unconscious that he had spoken aloud, and gazed past Riccardo into the darkness.

Then a cry came from outside, long, minor, alto; quivering from a great height.

For the second time Si Ismael rose and pulled back the curtain, as if in a trance. The grey of early morning was creeping into the courtyard, and a cool air like the shiver of a person awaking from a swoon moved the light material of his gandourah. The cry rang out again. Riccardo could see the minaret of a mosque dusky against the waking sky, slender like a campanile, and surmounted by the crescent of a dying moon. The muezzin was calling the first prayer:

"Allah akbar
Ayah salat
Ayah fatah
Allah akbar
Shadu enna."

With a muffled sound Si Ismael fell on his knees, and in the sonorous monotone prescribed for the worshipper, he intoned the universal prayer, touching the ground with his forehead, his face turned towards the quickening east. Riccardo gazed, amazed, as if another world were being opened before him. When the prayer was finished, Si Ismael rose, and, stooping down, blew out the lamp. The light was sufficient now, with the drawn curtain, to enable them to see

across the courtyard. To Riccardo's astonishment the man's face was transfigured. It was illumined like the face of a little child; the eyes were tender and wet.

He regarded Riccardo with vagueness, as if he had forgotten his presence. Then he clapped his hands. The half-breed in livery appeared, it seemed that he too had kept the night-watch without sleeping. Ismael gave him a direction in Arabic, to which the man grunted assent, and stood waiting. But his master turned his face to the east once more, and stood so, sunk in thought. Then he awoke from his reverie with a start, and came to where Riccardo stood, expectant.

"I think," he said, with a smile as ingenuous as though no threat had passed between them,—“I think that you may find yourself obliged to revise your opinion. Some day we will speak of the matter upon which we spoke just now. . . . You are of the same determination as ever?”

“The same.”

Si Ismael stroked his chin reflectively.

“My servant will conduct you to your hotel. The streets are puzzling to a stranger.”

And Riccardo followed the half-breed across the courtyard and out of the house, into the dawn of the new day.

CHAPTER IV

THE sun sent an early ray into the room which the two sisters shared together. Annunziata, who lay in bed with wide-open eyes, ringed beneath with bistre stains, watched the ray broaden and mount up the wall, and then at her sister, whose soft breathing showed that she was still asleep. From her own bed Annunziata could reach over to her sister's, and she did so, touching the sleeper lightly on the shoulder. Gioconda gave a little start, and awoke.

"Gioconda!"

"What time is it?" her sister answered, sleepily closing her lids again.

"Very early, only just daylight, but I've been awake for hours, and I must talk. I thought that daylight would never come."

"What is it, *caridda*? You don't look well. Have you one of your headaches? Shall I bathe your forehead with eau-de-cologne?"

"I haven't got a headache. Only something happened last night, and I couldn't lie awake any longer thinking of things and waiting for you to wake up."

"Why didn't you wake me before?" Gioconda got out of bed, and, throwing a wrapper over her slender shoulders, sat down by her sister's pillow.

"What is it, *caridda*?" she repeated, putting an arm round her neck maternally.

Annunziata gave a little sigh of relief. "It is selfish of me to wake you so early."

"Tell me the trouble, dear, and perhaps you will be able to sleep again."

Annunziata shrank against her sister's nightdress, like a frightened child.

"You will say that I am foolish; but ever since yesterday morning I have had the feeling that something horrible was going to happen. You know that I had it before papa was killed, and you did not believe me."

"I know, I know," Gioconda said in a low voice. She could not bear to talk of that, yet.

"Well, yesterday it was the same. . . . You remember papa used to tell us that *la mamma* knew, somehow, before things happened, because of San Niccolò——"

"But, *carina*, think of the lots of times that you have said that and nothing at all has happened. Is that all? You were tired yesterday, and this imagination grew upon you when you thought about it."

"But there is something else. I didn't let that thought prey upon me. I went to sleep, and dreamt about other things. Then about twelve I woke up, not ordinarily, but suddenly wide awake. And I heard the sound of a hand above my bed, feeling, groping. There was a little light from the window, and I looked. There was nothing there. Yet it was like a hand feeling in the dark. I was not afraid. It sounded as if it were trying to catch my attention, as if it were begging and pleading. I don't know how to express it, but the instinct was stronger than the sound. I knew I ought to do something. Then I remembered papa, so I got out of bed, and lit a candle, and got out my service-book. I read the

prayers for the repose of the souls of the dead, softly over. After that I lay quiet, and listened and listened, but there was nothing more. The candle burnt out, and then, for the first time, I began to be afraid. I couldn't sleep any more."

"It was a bad dream."

"I was awake."

"It was then a loose pipe, or something rustling in the wall."

Annunziata looked doubtful. With the unburdening of her terror, the memory of it seemed less substantial.

"Why question such things, *caridda*? What God sends, He will send to us whether there are forewarnings or not. Even supposing that it were not imagination, you did what you could."

"I also prayed to the Madonna."

"That is well, *caridda*. Sleep in peace until it is time to get up."

"Gioconda, I often wonder if our saints are so strong in this country . . . if the Holy Madonna herself can do so much here. It seemed to me, yesterday, when they dug the goddess out of the earth, that she was like the Madonna whose picture I have seen in Grazia's bedroom . . . and I wondered if some day, far ahead, they will dig our Madonnas out of the earth."

"Annunziata! What sinful thoughts!"

"I will confess it, *carina*," said Annunziata, closing her eyes.

Half an hour afterwards, Gioconda slipped quietly back into her own bed. Annunziata had fallen asleep, tired out, and it was her turn to watch the sun on the wall. She attributed the whole story to Annunziata's

sur-excited state and nervous imagination. There was something tempestuous and incomprehensible in the younger girl's nature that was alien to Gioconda's temperament. And lately Annunziata had not been herself, she had become reticent. She had withdrawn her confidence from her elder sister, formerly so complete, and Gioconda had felt hurt by the withdrawal.

Unable to sleep, the morning tempted her. The air blew in freshly, and the room was hot. She got up, and quietly washed and dressed, tiptoeing out of the room so as not to disturb the sleeping girl. Outside the hotel the Arab porter salaamed, and the scent of roses came towards her from the French garden-square in front of the hotel. Within its confines palms and acacias grew in dusty pride, sheltering the rose-bushes, which were the treasure of the small French community.

She skirted the little green patch, and made her way towards the native city, passing in by the massive Bab Djelladin. Like Riccardo the previous night, she went by the Rue Saussier, which, as ever, was thick with human beings and flies. She looked at these people of the Sacred City with curiosity. Poverty had stamped its curse upon them, and, too often, disease. She passed one blind man after another, even blind babies. The terror of the blazing South—darkness—had smitten them. Yet, with the everlasting patience of the East, blindness was borne without a murmur. The result of the toil of the women at the carpet looms was seen in the pale, scrofulous children who played about the eating booths, where already choice morsels were being fried in boiling oil. Gioconda's heart ached for them. She saw no richly dressed

brats like those that played about their fathers' shops in the Tunis souks, or gravely assisted in the manufacture of silken braid and embroidered slippers—these were children who had known pain as well as caresses.

The animals wore the same look of dumb suffering; they were neglected and bleeding. Women passed her, and peered at her curiously through their veils, but the veils were rusty black and covered them completely. They were so many black ghosts among all this sunlit colour, the gay stuffs hanging from the calico-merchants', the bright fruit spread out under a striped awning, and the brilliant dresses of the anæmic children.

She walked on until she found herself again without the walls; beside the enormous cisterns known as the Basin of the Aglabites, passing a cattle-market just outside the town. Tall, emaciated camels, anchored by fibrous ropes, sneered above the throng of Bedawin and herdsmen; donkeys cowered together; goats philosophically awaited milking. A young *cadi*, magnificently dressed, stared at her as she went past, and a host of ragged children ran up to the foreign woman to beg. The *cadi* galloped up and dispersed them with some vigorous Arabic, and, saluting, rode off. The mixture of insolence and politeness was so characteristic of his race that Gioconda smiled to herself.

A second later he wheeled round and rode after her.

"Is madame aware that it is not safe for a lady to walk here alone?"

"I do not mean to go far—only to the Mosque of Sidi Sahabi in any case."

"It is not wise to go unaccompanied. The district is not very tranquil just now, madame. If you would

permit it, I would offer myself as a companion that far."

His manner was genuinely solicitous, and Gioconda decided to accept his offer. She thanked him in Arabic. The young man's manner instantly changed. His face illumined, and he jumped off his horse, leading it by the bridle.

"The mother-tongue is sweet on the lips of a stranger," he said, using the Arab proverb.

The trace of insolence in his bearing at first had vanished, and for the ten minutes of walking that lie between the city walls and Sidi Sahabi he conversed with her as simply as Achmed might have done.

"You like Kairouan?" he asked, as she paused to look back at the city behind them. It was white and glittering—once more the City of Prayer, with countless minarets soaring upwards; many-breasted, like the white Diana, with domes.

"From here I like it," she replied. "But within the walls it is sad, like a place of mourning."

The young man looked uncomprehending. She pointed to the black figure of a woman.

"*Eiwa!* Your men wear black, and our women wear black—where is the difference?"

"It was not that alone. There is so much poverty—so many blind and diseased."

He turned on her with a slight smile.

"But it has always been like that, with us. . . . What does it matter? Afterwards there is Paradise . . ."

"But it cannot be right that so much misery should exist that could be helped."

He was merely puzzled, then he smiled again good-naturedly.

“ Ah, you mean hygiene——”

To him this was the fetish-word of the West.

A few minutes of walking brought them to the Mosque of Sidi Sahabi, whose commonplace exterior in this early morning light had something of supernatural beauty. It is on the interior that the fantastic decoration of the Arab architect and stone-mason has been lavished; for this most sacred of all the mosques in Kairouan is a casket containing a jewel; holding what the Prophet himself valued beyond all treasure—his friend. They entered the first courtyard with its magnificent tiling, and into the beauty of the Koran Room. A stairway led into the mosque itself through a second vestibule and another courtyard. As they came to the entrance, he whispered to her, “Keep off the matting.” He himself kicked off his shoes, and went in before her. At first she was not able to notice the famous carved wood of the ceiling, the Byzantine capitals to the avenues of columns, or the lace-work of the stuccoed cupola and walls. She saw only the cool arcades, the rich bareness, the sun falling in swords of light across the grass matting, and the score of worshippers, white-robed, their foreheads bent to the ground, Mecca-wards, as they would be in death.

The murmur of prayer was like the murmur in a summer forest. Faith, primitive, absorbing, was in the bearing of these praying Arabs, who had again lifted their faces towards the Holy Place of the Prophet; a faith which even the blindest devotee of modern Catholicism rarely attains, was luminous in their eyes. Gioconda, herself a devout Catholic, felt herself vibrate to the note of this devotion as one musical instrument to another. Yet she felt horror at herself for being so moved by

the rite of a false religion. Was not Mahomet the Antichrist?

She glanced at her companion. He was praying like the rest.

At last she understood the misery: the blind boys, the toiling women, the tired children. . . . "Afterwards, there is Paradise . . ."

The young *cadi* had risen, and was motioning to her. She trod lightly, avoiding the matting, in the direction he indicated. In a little room off the mosque was the tomb of the Barber himself, fenced off by a grille from profaning hands. It was richly draped, and a priceless silken carpet of ancient Kairouanese make covered the floor. Ostrich eggs and brightly-coloured glass baubles were suspended around the grille, and a glass chandelier depended from the ceiling above the tomb. Gioconda felt as if she were beside the shrine of a saint of her own religion, and not that of the friend of Antichrist. Her lips moved silently in prayer.

Inside all that magnificence lay the dust of the little Barber of Mecca, who had been buried with a hair from the Prophet's beard next his heart which had never beat false, another near his right arm which had shaved the most sacred head, and another under his tongue which had wagged so freely to the Blessed One. There was a pathos in all this absurdity, a dignity in this simplicity. Here too was the scent of burnt perfumes. She left at last, and recrossed the mosque, down the stair, out through the courtyard into the roadway. Her companion walked beside her with perfect gravity and silence.

"I shall return now," she said, as he took his horse from a man who held it during their entry.

"I will take you back as far as the city. You must be careful not to go out alone, madame. Here—as you are not French, I can speak with freedom—the feeling is very strong against the foreigners and the Christians."

"And you?"

"Oh, I was educated at the Sadiki! I am not a good Mohammedan, and I have many friends among the French. But here—they have the narrow spirit. They are animals—ferocious!" He accented the last words, speaking in French, and glancing round to make sure that no one was in earshot. Then he changed the subject, asked her how long she was staying, and of whom her party was composed. They were discussing the war in Morocco by the time she reached the walls again; and, with another salute, he mounted his horse and rode off quickly.

Gioconda began to feel ready for her roll and coffee, and retraced her way back through the Rue Saussier. Somehow its air of peace had departed in that brief hour that had elapsed since she had walked through it on her way to the mosque. There was covert excitement; no Arabs were sleeping or playing dominoes in the wayside cafés as usual. Groups were whispering furtively together. Every one was talking, the booths and shops were deserted. The fruit-merchant's quavering song, the water-seller's melody, which usually sounded all through the day, were silent. Selling and buying had ceased. Gioconda noticed that they were staring at her with animosity. Finally a French gendarme came up to her, and she noticed that close behind him a couple of Zouaves were patrolling the street.

"I think I must take you back to your hotel, mademoiselle."

She assented gratefully. "What is the matter? What has happened?"

"There is some disturbance at Sfax; what, we have not heard yet, beyond rumours. The telegraph wires have been tampered with at Kalaa-Srira, and there was an explosion on the line. We are temporarily cut off from news. It may not be serious. Still, here the people are like tinder waiting for a lighted match. You had better not go out much, and not at all unless you are accompanied."

Riccardo was waiting outside the hotel, his Panama pulled over his forehead. He too, she fancied, looked white and tired.

"Where's Annunziata?" he asked.

"She has had a bad night, and went to sleep late. I will take her coffee up to her."

"I knocked at your door a little while ago, and she did not answer."

"She is probably soundly asleep."

"I'm glad you're back," he said, with genuine relief. "The *padrone* has just been telling me that the telegraph wires and railway have been wrecked. There seems to be trouble at Sfax."

"So I heard in the town. I will go and see after Annunziata."

She went upstairs, and, creeping softly to the door, listened, then opened it gently.

But the bed was empty, and the girl's clothes were gone. She felt the bed. It was cold, so that its occupant had evidently been dressed for some time.

Puzzled, she descended again, looking into the salon and dining-room on her way, only to find them empty.

She rejoined Riccardo.

"Annunziata is not there."

He looked blank.

"Her hat is gone," Gioconda continued, with a troubled voice.

He questioned the Arab porter.

"Yes, the other mademoiselle left the hotel about three-quarters of an hour. She asked in which direction this mademoiselle had gone, and when she heard in the Arab town, she went there too."

"Alone?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"You should not have let her go," said Riccardo angrily. "You should have told her that it is not safe to-day."

"It is not my business to tell the foreigners what they should do," the man replied, with insolence.

Riccardo stood for a moment reflecting; then he spoke to Gioconda reassuringly.

"I will go and bring her back at once. Don't be troubled about it, Gioconda mia. She cannot have gone far. It is the fault of no one except this fool of an Arab. Have your coffee, and a siesta after your morning's walk."

Gioconda assented with outward composure, but her heart was heavy with foreboding and anxiety.

The day was sultry, but the sky after eleven was covered. Gioconda found the heat and the tension together intolerable, and longed to escape from the hotel into the air. Inaction oppressed her. Since the early morning she had not seen either of the two men—from which she guessed that Annunziata was not yet found. With every hour her anxiety grew more

intense. At half-past twelve she went down to find the dining-room occupied by half a dozen French officers, who rose and bowed mechanically at her entrance.

She inquired of the head-waiter if they had brought news.

"Things are not so bad as they say, mademoiselle. There was a religious riot of some sort at Sfax started by a preaching dervish, and there was some shooting. Reinforcements are to be sent from Tunis and Sousse to strengthen the garrison there and here, and some of our men of war are already there, ready to give the rascals some red pepper."

"I thought most of the available fighting blood had been pumped into Morocco," Gioconda said, with a faint smile.

"You are right, mademoiselle. I cannot imagine, *moi*, why *la patrie* spends good money and blood over here!" the waiter replied, sweeping away the crumbs with Gallic vigour. "France expends more money in North Africa than she makes, not to mention the good French blood spilt in fighting these accursed vermin. Look at Morocco! What is Morocco to do with us, I should like to know!"

As he placed the dessert before her, he told her that the line at Kalaa-Srira was being repaired, but that it would be a little while before the telegraphic communication could be restored. The wires had not been cut, but had been chemically treated in some way which prevented the transmission of messages, and made it extremely difficult to find the affected parts.

After lunch, Madame Perrier, extremely agitated and plump, called her into her little office to tell her

that she had despatched her most trusted dragoman to help Riccardo in his search. She wept about it, which did not improve Gioconda's spirits. She retired, as soon as she could escape from Madame Perrier's well-meant sympathy, to her own room, and waited again in the breathless heat. Everything, even the bed-cover, was hot and gritty to the touch, and the leaden sky seemed to diffuse an intolerable glare. She closed the shutters and bathed her face and hands in cold water, then began again to count the minutes. At intervals the chamber-woman, who was an Italian, put in her head to pour forth consolation.

"*Povera, povera!* it is hard to have to stay here and watch the clock. Never fear, the saints will protect the signorina, even in this wicked place. But it is always hardest to sit still and rack one's heart—that's a torment we women have to endure all our lives, from the Mother of God downwards."

At three Riccardo tapped at her room. His face told her that there had been cause for her fear.

"She was seen early this morning with an Arab. As the police supposed him to be a dragoman she was not given an escort, merely warned in passing that she should return to the French quarter at once. The police are searching. A reward is offered for information."

"They say that they cannot do much?" she asked, divining what he had not liked to imply.

He nodded, and sank down into a chair. "It is this rising at Sfax that ties our hands. Here it is quiet enough, seemingly, but it is ready to break out into a blaze at any moment." He buried his face in his hands hopelessly.

She put her hand on his shoulder.

"She may be in safety, Riccardo. We must be as brave as we can."

"I have been such a fool!" he burst out, with a sob in his throat.

"You a fool? How?" she asked. "No one can be blamed."

He checked himself. "I wish we had never come to this accursed place."

She found him childish, as most women find men in an emotional crisis.

"The Arab she was with may be trustworthy."

"No Arab is trustworthy! They are a damned race."

She was silent. "Where is Giovanni?" she asked after a pause.

"I don't know. He was with me part of the morning. He has gone to interview an Arab whom he thinks will help us if any one can." He suddenly roused himself. "Don't you worry, Gioconda. I ought to have kept all this from you."

She could not help smiling. "I would rather know everything. Do the police think that there will be a rising here?"

"They think that the drastic measures taken at Sfax will put a stopper on the discontentment here," he replied. "But as soon as the trains are running, you had best go back to Tunis to wait for us there. Madame Perrier is going, and you could travel with her."

"Do you think that I could leave you here alone to find Annunziata!" the girl cried in sudden vehemence. Then upon an impulse she told him of what had occurred the previous night.

Riccardo listened, and had sufficient inherent superstition to feel a chill run through his veins.

Now that he had realised the fact that he loved her, that he desired her, Annunziata's midnight reading of the prayers for the dead seemed full of malignant omen. For he had suddenly awakened to that knowledge with the loss of her physical presence. His cup was not the less bitter for that.

CHAPTER V

IN an upper room, Si Ismael ben Aloui paced up and down, dictating some letters to a scribe who sat cross-legged and barefoot in a corner of the room ; his brass inkpot beside him, his reed pen moving swiftly over the paper. It was about the hour of midday, and the doorway, opening on to the upper colonnade, afforded a glimpse of sun-baked roofs, and pigeons wheeling in a brazen sky. One patch of strong sunlight entered the room, and in it the heat danced, like a fluid. There was a subdued sound of buzzing flies.

"Repeat what thou hast written," Si Ismael said to his secretary.

The scribe read glibly—

"TO MOHAMMED SA'AD BEY,—In the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the Compassionate, I salute thee. We have sent the bale of silk, which will reach thee before this letter, and trust that we may compel the young merchant to reason by this means. Here, thanks to Allah, all is well and quiet. By the mercy of God the market is unaffected by this unhappy business at Sfax. Our influence is for peace. This sudden uprising is like to be a calamity for the silk trade, hence it would be a disaster to in any way precipitate the matter of which thou wast writing . . ."

He came to an expectant stop.

Si Ismael stooped, and took the paper and pen from his hand. "I will add the superscription and greetings. Go thou, Rashid, my son, and seek the Cadi Ibrahim, and say to him that I have somewhat to discuss with him. Bring him back with thee."

Rashid rose with alacrity.

"He shall return with me within the hour."

"And do not run thy fingers in thy ears as thou passest through the streets."

"Are not my ears ever open?"

Rashid slipped his feet into his shoes at the entrance and went out.

Si Ismael swiftly added some lines of writing to the letter he had written, then, folding it into an envelope and fastening it, he sealed it with the seal that he wore on a ring.

He was in the act of addressing the envelope, when there was the tap of heels and the clank of silver along the colonnade. A veiled woman stood in the entrance, darkening the room. He did not glance up until he had finished writing, and then placing the letter with half a dozen others on a low table, he said briefly—

"It is thou, Mabrouka. Enter."

"Peace be with thee."

"Peace."

She entered silently, slowly, casting her scarlet slippers before she trod on the carpet. He glanced at her expectantly.

"Sit, sit! Well, thy news?"

"There is little. These fools talk, talk, talk the day long in the cafés, but none thinks to strike a blow. The *imam* of the Mosque of the Camel murmureth against thee in the souks, and would have the people

rise before the new moon, which is written to be an auspicious time."

"A clacking tongue makes few sparks. Thou hadst that news from whom?"

"From Aziza, the dancer."

"He is not of thy lovers then?"

"Nor of hers. He hath a malignant disease. Aziza had the information from his brother Ali."

"Good, good. See that she gets full details. . . . And Safti, the grain-merchant?"

"All is well. He has everything in order, and can trust his cousin as himself."

"Good again. There is no other news?"

"None."

"The girl was conveyed to Sa'ad Bey yesterday. I have even now written the letter speaking of it. If Motlog fails, thou must carry it. There is no safety by other means."

"I am ready to start when thou wilt."

"I shall have other need of thee in Tunis again shortly, so soon as this turmoil has blown over. These fools, these fools!" He clenched his hands in anger. "To pluck the unripe fruit after this manner!"

She bowed her head and prepared to go.

"No, stay, there is something else. . . . There is this Sicilian. Why has he ceased to visit thee?"

"Thou didst not say aught of——"

"True. And thou wast here. Does he know where thou art?"

She reflected. "I gave him the means to find me."

"In Tunis?"

"No, here."

"So much the better. Take trouble with him, and

if he visits thee again, use every means for me. Dost thou understand? He is obstinate."

"I understand."

"Of what material dost thou find him?" he inquired, leaning back and polishing his finger-tips.

She gave a low laugh. "*Aie*, he is to my taste."

"Then thy task, my soul, is the more agreeable."

She leant forward swiftly, tenderly.

"Thou wilt not destroy him, Ismael. He is too pleasant to die."

"We shall press him to the uttermost, but it would be of little use to destroy him, unless he promises danger. He can be of service yet, under pressure." He regarded her curiously. "Thou hast never so prayed for any man. Can I trust thee in this?"

"Thou knowest that a hundred lovers are nothing in my sight compared to thee," she said. "This boy has not even been that."

"A protesting woman is like the false dawn," he returned, polishing his nails again. "Why lie to me? It is unnecessary."

"Have I ever lied to thee? Cannot these seven years of servitude give me justice?" she cried in fierce tones. "Have I not paid for one treachery a hundred times?"

He shrugged his shoulders slightly, but gave her a gentle and somewhat wearied look.

"Have I ever ceased to love thee?" she continued in a low, harsh voice. "Even when the hot iron kissed my cheek, did I curse thee, Ismael? Did I not return, and beg for thy pity?"

"Enough, enough! Go in peace, child, lest I praise thee or blame thee, and so raise the wind of discussion."

She seized the hem of his robe, and kissed it again and again, lifting her veil to do so.

Then she dropped it, and stood before him passionately.

"Sidi, have I thy trust again?"

"Have I not said it? Take the letter and put it in thy bosom. I will send thee word by noonday if the letter is to be carried and how."

She took the letter silently, with a long sigh. Then, as abruptly as she had come, she went; while Si Ismael, with a smile that was half irony and half absence of spirit, bent again to his task of writing.

The affair at Sfax had been given a paragraph in the foreign journals, and three-quarters of a column to the Paris press. Two days afterwards it had been forgotten by the general public. Prompt measures had been taken. There had been gun-boats in the harbour: reinforcements had been supplied, and some of the ring-leaders had been summarily hanged. The prime originator of the mischief, the dervish, had disappeared. Quiet was gradually restored, and life took on its normal aspect, at any rate on the surface.

The North African papers began by making a fanfaronade about the incident, but apparently official orders were issued, for little was said after one sensational leading article in the *Dépêche Tunisienne*. Which proves one virtue at least on the part of the French Government.

In Kairouan, too, things had reassumed an air of normality. The little French colony began to be somewhat ashamed of their first alarm, and pooh-poohed the past danger.

With the restoration of communication with the

outside world came the tidings that Caltinisetta, whose escape from prison had been reported several weeks previously, had at length been recaptured by the authorities in Calabria, and that he had voluntarily confessed to the murder of Ciccio Scarfi, which he declared was to avenge a private matter. So Si Ismael was right after all; and Riccardo blessed his uncle's murderer for having kept the name of Giovanna out of his confession, and for making the cause of his revenge secret. For Gioconda's sake he was glad. He broke the news gently to her, and implored her to let him take her back to Tunis, whither this fresh news demanded that he should return at least for a few hours.

"I cannot go back without Annunziata," she replied.

"What can you do here? You know that we are working day and night to find her. . . . I shall not even sleep in Tunis, but shall return here immediately."

"What could I do in Tunis? Answer condolences, and be questioned by all my friends?" She gave a sad little half-smile. "We must tell Salvatore at last, I suppose."

"I have written to Salvatore and told him already."

"Then all Little Sicily will know."

"The wider the publicity the more hope of finding her soon."

"I shall not leave Kairouan until she leaves it with me. . . . Besides, Riccardo, you need looking after. You are tiring yourself too much. You were up all last night. You have not slept or rested for days."

"I am not tired," he responded, though his

dark-circled eyes contradicted his words. "It is you who are worn out," he said, taking her hand. "Come with me, Gioconda. This is not a place where women can be of practical use, and I should feel happier if you were in Tunis."

"I cannot, I cannot!" she cried.

She was firm in her refusal, and saw him off by the morning train.

The news about Caltinisetta, recalling that night of horror in the Opera, unnerved her, and much of her time that day was spent in the poor little chapel of the French quarter. Here, for the first time since the news of her father's death and her sister's loss, her unnatural composure gave way and the healing relief of tears came. And here San Calogero found her, before the figure of Our Lady, her face swollen with weeping.

He came and knelt beside her to express the sympathy which he had no words to utter, rather than to share in the worship which no longer had his childhood's meaning for him. In the tawdry blue figure, gently maternal, in the smiling babe, he recognised Demeter and Persephone, Isis and Osiris, Diana the hundred-breasted, but from his heart he revered the emblem of Maternity, the emblem of Spring, eternal in their divinity, eternal in their mystery. Into the silence of the little chapel came from outside the abrupt minor song of an Arab at work, and the rustle of the date-palm that was swayed by the open door in the hot wind. With these sounds the spirit of Africa, enigmatic, immense, seemed borne into the place, to pervade even the sanctuary. A light air caught some sand and carried it on a sultry gust into

the chapel itself. It was like the dust of dead faiths. San Calogero thought of a thin-bodied, dark, little Arab girl, who on such a day as this had clung to him, and whispered barbaric love-words that she had learnt in the sorrow of the knowledge of things; and rising from his knees he went to the door looking out into the white glare of sunshine.

After a moment Gioconda joined him.

He looked at her, part curiously, part enviously, part tenderly, and for a while they walked along without speaking.

"There is nothing fresh?" she asked at length.

"Nothing," he replied, troubled.

"And that Arab who offered information?"

"Another false scent. Everywhere we can get nothing but lies. Every scoundrel is willing to tell a fresh lie for fresh *toma*."

He noticed that the light of a new peace was in her bearing. "Do not think me absurd," she said, with a hopeful gravity that was almost buoyant, "but I have a conviction that we shall hear soon! As I was in the chapel just now, after you left me, it seemed to me as if a sudden relief came, as if help were *promised*."

He did not dare to tarnish her faith by his own pessimism. What would have been comparatively possible in Tunis was next to impossible here. They were met by a blank wall, as featureless as those which an Arab house turns to the street. Clues ended in blind alleys. Here was a whole city ranged in hostility, not to the individual, not to the nationality, but to the Christian.

"Have you been out to the excavations?" she asked, turning the conversation into another course.

"Not to-day. It is still the feast of Mouled—till

Friday. To-day is Wednesday, isn't it? We excavators get a good many idle days through the two religions—the Mohammedans won't work on their holy days, and the White Fathers of course close the works on saints' days and Sundays. We who are neither one nor the other come in for both—when, if left to ourselves, I am afraid we should grudge even the seventh day 'civil repose.'"

"But you are a Catholic, Giovanni?" she said, a little pained.

"Nominally, yes; but a bad one, I fear," he replied gently.

His lukewarmness, more thought than expressed, was a wet blanket to her own temporary reassurance and peace, so quickly does one mind affect another. She was conscious that his outlook, different from her own, was genuine and sterling nevertheless, and she experienced the same annoyance with herself for acknowledging his right to a different creed as she had felt in the Mosque of Sidi Sahabi. This was her faith—that she allowed the possibility that it might be false! An absolute belief must mean an absolute intolerance. With the death of intolerance comes the death of belief. She already, for the knowledge of his scepticism, felt desolation—felt the glow of her late comfort depart from her soul.

As if in communion with her, he said, "I could wish I had your belief—my mother's belief, as you and my mother have it."

"If it were not for my religion, I couldn't bear this," she answered mechanically.

"I would not have you lose it," he returned. "A woman sceptic is only half a woman, and you are my idea of what makes a perfect woman." He spoke in

all simplicity, as if unaware of what the words taken literally meant, and she received it unconsciously, considering the first rather than the latter part of his remark.

"I am often glad that I do not know enough, or am not clever enough, to have the struggle," she answered.

"The strength of Catholicism, like Mohammedanism, is that it shuts the door on all that is not, from the dogmatic point of view, essential fact. I have nothing but envy for those closed doors."

She again experienced a shock. To him the true and the false were upon the same basis. Yet the faith that she had witnessed in the mosque was, as she realised with shame, no less unshaken than her own. Antichrist was followed with more implicit confidence than Christ.

They returned to the hotel. A wire from Riccardo contained the information that he would be with them during the latter part of the following day. The afternoon and evening passed without event. The racking monotony was intolerable. There was no further information about the missing girl. Gioconda was interviewed by an official twice, had to sign several papers in Riccardo's absence, and was questioned about her sister with red-tape minuteness.

The next day was a repetition of the last. A second wire brought the communication that Riccardo could not arrive till the late afternoon. To distract the lonely girl, and take her out of herself, Giovanni took her in the afternoon through a part of the Arab city. They went to the sacred well, whose waters bubble through the earth to meet those of the holy well Zemzem in Mecca, round which a camel, doomed

till death to pace to the sound of the falling water, moves in an eternal circle, his head nearly grazing the roof, and his hide worn bare by labour.

He took her into the Great Mosque, the largest in Africa, where the fallen glories of two civilisations and two religions have been mosaiced into a whole by the adaptive genius of Arab architects. They crossed the vast courtyard and ascended the minaret, from whence they could see all Kairouan, high-walled, white and ivory, beneath. Here was the marble sundial, which recorded only the hours of prayer, typical of the city over which the muezzin's cry had rung five times daily from sunrise to sunset for more than a thousand years. The sun seemed more intense here than below, the sky vaster. The muezzin, thought Gioconda, must feel closer to God as he leant out at this height to call the universal message to the four quarters of the earth. Silence, and sun, and blue sky ; and prayer : these were in close communion. She felt the peace which passes understanding touch her soul, an assurance of the care of the Infinite for the finite.

Riccardo, meanwhile, had spent a busy time in Tunis. Salvatore had to be instructed as to this and that, there was legal business in connection with Caltinissetta's confession, and a mass of details which demanded his attention. Salvatore, to his surprise, had not made it his business to talk about his sister's disappearance ; on the contrary, he had endeavoured to keep it out of the papers. His fear that the family would be talked about through her absence was as pitiable as his fears for her safety. Finally, Riccardo had moved heaven and earth with the authorities to bring pressure to bear in order to discover the where-

abouts of the missing girl. They were profuse with their sympathy, profuse with their promises, but his heart was heavy as he took his seat in the railway carriage for Kairouan. The conviction was more and more borne in upon him that there was only one person to whom to apply—and that person, Si Ismael. If, as was after all possible, he had had nothing to do with the disappearance, he could at least, by lifting his forefinger the least part of an inch, set in motion the secret machinery which not all the police in North Africa could reach. To apply to him meant nothing short of surrender, meant nothing less than defeat. Yet, if the price had to be paid, it must be paid.

In his pocket-book lay a letter which he had received the morning he had left Kairouan. The postmark was Tunis.

“I renew my offer to you. If you will give me the details of your cousin’s disappearance, which is reported from Kairouan, I will do my best to help you in the search. CONSTANTIN CONRADIN.”

He took out the pocket-book in which he had placed the letter for safety, and, unfastening it, drew out the thin envelope. With it another paper fluttered to the ground. He took it up. It was in childish, unformed characters: he recognised it as that which Mabrouka had given him the night of her visit. Instead of reperusing Si Ismael’s note, he read the dancer’s mysterious scrawl again. Then he spread open that of Si Ismael and compared the two. That of Mabrouka was heavily perfumed. In the ill-spelt French he recognised her crude magnetic personality. Si Ismael’s was in the small, clear script of the scholar.

Were the two in league? Was Mabrouka's offer of help genuine, or only a further trap?

He debated the question throughout the long journey to Kairouan. The train was almost intolerably hot and dirty. Every station occupied a disproportionate amount of time on the six hours' journey. It was close on seven o'clock when he reached Kairouan. The only other Europeans travelling by the train were three Americans overstaying the usual tourist season, accompanied by an exceptionally gorgeous dragoman, whom they addressed as Yussef. At Kairouan this individual swaggered prodigiously over the transference of his charges into the carriage sent by the hotel. The whole party caused Riccardo faint amusement.

Both Gioconda and Giovanni were on the platform to meet him. He caught the flutter of her white dress with its black waist-ribbon long before the train stopped. The answer he had anticipated was on their lips in answer to his anxious question: "No news."

He had much to tell them as they walked back to the hotel, and, with Sicilian quickness, he thought that he noticed a subtle change in the attitude of his two companions towards each other; a confidence, an intimacy produced by the two days during which they had been alone together.

At dinner the three tourists who had travelled with Riccardo—two men and a woman—were loud-voiced in their complaints over everything; over the wines, the length of the journey, the dirt of the town, and the incivility of the Arabs. When they discovered that they could not leave by the midday train the

next day if they wished to witness the devotions of the Eissowa, they seemed to regard it as a want of attention on the part of the waiter, or as a plot between the landlord and the fraternity to force visitors to stay another night.

"I shall ask Yussef," said the woman, with energy.

But Yussef, when summoned, bore out the waiter. He had warned madame that it would be necessary to spend two nights.

"Why can't they perform in the morning?"

Yussef shrugged his magnificent shoulders. "It is their holy day to-morrow, madame, and the hour for the prayer is five."

"It is a most inconvenient hour!"

"You can't reasonably expect the poor beggars to change the time of their evening service to suit us, Belle," one of her two companions remarked.

She laughed, with restored good temper. "Well, I guess that's true enough, only if I'd known this place was going to be such a one-horse town, I'd have come to-morrow and escaped a night."

"Will monsieur and madame go out after dinner?" Yussef inquired, with unshaken gravity.

They decided they would not. Yussef could consider himself free.

The Sicilians, who for many days had had the dining-room to themselves, listened with some interest.

"The attitude of the tourist towards the sacred city!" Giovanni commented in a low tone to Gioconda.

"What is the Eissowa?" she asked, as they left the dining-room and issued for a moment into the cool of the brief twilight outside the hotel.

Riccardo left Giovanni in the depths of explanation, and dropped behind them, the better to think out his plan of action. He was definitely resolved to apply to Mabrouka for the help she had promised, and to go that evening himself to the place she had indicated. The spicy warmth of the air, full of unfamiliar odours, the translucent green of the twilight, the palms in the square cut against the clear sky, brought him a sense of being near a fresh revolution of the wheel of destiny; brought to him also something of the vague personality of the woman whose help he was about to ask. The voluptuousness of this Eastern evening, and the scent of roses tossed him from the garden, reminded him of Mabrouka, with her evasive coquetries, her oddness and charm, and the thought that he might be about to get into touch with her again affected him to a point of unrest.

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CHAPTER VI

RICCARDO waited until Giovanni and Gioconda had re-entered the hotel; then he set off at a brisk pace toward the native town. When he reached the Bab Djelladin he stopped. Out of the dusk the lights of the French quarter showed like pin-points behind him: before him, through the horseshoe gateway in the massive wall, wound the unevenly illuminated Arab street, full of slowly-moving white figures, noiseless and feline. His pause was the signal for an attack by laughing, ragged urchins, who crowded around him with cries of "*Un so'do ! un sous !*"

"Give nothing, monsieur," said an unctuous voice in his ear. "If monsieur in his generosity opens his purse, one will annoy him more!"

Wheeling round, Riccardo found the ubiquitous Jew who had pestered him on a previous evening. He reflected. Greasy, oleaginous, rapacious as he was, the Jew might have his uses after all.

"What are your terms for the evening?" he asked abruptly.

The Jew considered. "Ten francs, monsieur!"

"That is double the charge for a whole day!"

"True, monsieur, but it is the hour of repose, and the city is not over-safe in these days."

His huckstering speciousness amused Riccardo. But as he was to play the part of an ordinary tourist for once, the Jew was opportune.

"I will pay you five francs."

The Hebrew expostulated, but finally resigned himself.

"Where does monsieur wish to go?"

Riccardo thought. It would never do to ask to be taken to the anchors of Noah, whatever they might be, the first thing. The Jew might scent a mystery and talk. Oriental Jews are about as dependable as burnt thread.

"There are dancing cafés?" he asked.

"But certainly." His parrot's eyes twinkled gratefully at the prospect of free entertainment, and he waxed loquacious as they went through the narrow streets, elbowing the groups of Arabs who were still keeping the feast. Illuminations and tapestries continued to mark the gala week, but to-night there was little music. An air of gloom, of depression, seemed to reign in spite of the gaiety of lights and colours.

"It is monsieur who has been searching for the lost Italian lady? All Kairouan has been speaking of it," he observed in his imperfect French.

Riccardo grunted.

"She is the sister of monsieur? his wife?"

"No." He checked the Jew's flow of curiosity by, "What is that to thee? Tell me thy name."

"Raphael, monsieur; Raphael Bokhara ben Daoud."

"The season has been a good one for you guides?"

"Alas no, monsieur! The foreigners have been afraid because of the war in Morocco and the plague in the ports. It has been a bad year for us. It is lucky that the *affaire de Sfax* did not take place till the end of the season, or we should be starving."

They had come to a halt before a small house in

the main street, from which a sound of nasal and vigorous music was proceeding. The Jew preceded Riccardo, and, entering, climbed up a steep wooden stair to an upper room full of cigarette smoke and burnt musk. A score of Arabs sat cross-legged on a raised dais spread with matting, and some few, in European dress with red fezes, preferred chairs. A higher platform was occupied by five tawdry dancers and the musicians. Two of the girls played the darbouka, one man a violin held between his knees, at which he sawed for dear life, another sheepskin bagpipes, a third a zorna, or open-mouthed oboe. The girls, clad in red and pale blue satin, with small gold-embroidered caps on their heads, were cross-legged on cushions, and regarded the audience placidly, sipping absinthe from time to time from glasses on a table placed before them.

The next moment a new arrival entered with leisure and dignity. It was Yussef, the handsome dragoman of the American party. He was evidently not a stranger. Greetings were shouted to him from various parts of the room. The houris condescended to throw him smiles: he dexterously threw them a rose each in return. Finally, twirling his moustache, he settled himself on a chair so close to the platform that he could converse with ease to the nearest dancer, a swarthy, good-looking creature.

The Jew nudged his elbow, pointing out with a chuckle an Arab on the opposite side of the room.

"That is the cake-seller, Ali, monsieur. Do you see how jealously he regards? He is the lover of Aziza, the dancing-girl who is talking to the guide Yussef."

Riccardo was entertained by the little byplay.

The eyes of the jealous lover burnt in his pallid face as he watched the unconscious pair.

"He is a learned man, too, monsieur, this Ali, and can recite the Koran from cover to cover without a fault. He belongs also to the Eissowa. Once he used to be avaricious, but now he spends all he has on trinkets. I would that I had the money he has given to the slut!"

At last one of the girls lazily drew her feet from under her and got up. She was not fat like the Tunisian Jewesses, but she had none of the statuesque grace of Mabrouka. She regarded the audience languidly, then began to revolve round and round, her stomach and hips jerking rhythmically in time to the music, her arms waving with a serpentine motion.

This had not proceeded for more than a moment before she dropped her arms, ceased her contortions, and with the most wearied air possible descended from the platform and stood before Riccardo, neither regarding him nor any one else.

He understood that she refused to dance more unless he were mulcted of his superfluity, and put a franc in her hand, but she continued to stand before him with the same bored expression.

The Jew expostulated with her in Arabic.

"Shame on thee, Zulecha, daughter of the garbage! Hath not the stranger already paid two francs for coffee where we others pay a half? Thou rapacious *naga*, she-camel!"

She sulkily left them, and sat down again. The Arabs called out mocking remarks to her, which she answered by a brilliant smile, but resumed her beating of the darbouka.

"Aziza!" clamoured a voice, and others took up the cry, "Aziza, Aziza!"

Aziza blinked her fine eyes, and listened to the compliments of the dragoman, without taking the smallest notice. The cake-seller continued to watch her sullenly. The other dancers did not look overpleased at the expression of favouritism, but they did not relax their look of haughty indifference. A small bouquet of orange-flower compressed into a tight little nosegay fell at Aziza's feet, and the calls for her were renewed. Riccardo tossed a franc on to the stage, remembering the night when Mabrouka's name had been cried. She put out one foot and drew it to her, but was unmoved. She might have been a sphinx, so apparently oblivious was she of all mundane things, except the dragoman. Another bouquet was flung at her, this time of jasmine.

Deliberately, delicately, she got up, collected the flowers, put them on the table, and made a turn or two of the dance, smiling meanwhile with her eyes half-closed. Yussef smoked his cigarette appreciatively and leant forward. Then, like her predecessor, she stopped abruptly and got off the platform. Riccardo expected to see her standing mute before him like the first, but she passed him by, and, walking right up to the dragoman, sat herself on his knee and flung her arms round his neck with an abandon which seemed unconscious of any observers. He smiled the smile of the triumphant, and, laying down his cigarette, returned her caress with ardour.

"*Elle est amoureuse,*" observed the Jew, leaning back and blowing a ring of smoke.

A sudden commotion interrupted him. The cake-vendor had sprung to his feet, murder in his eyes, and

was being held back by the ready *kahwaji*, who had perhaps seen this end to the comedy. In an instant the place became pandemonium. There were cries, shouts, confusion.

"Let's get out of this," Riccardo said, and they managed to make their way through the pushing, excited Arabs down the stairs and out into the street.

The air was clean and sweet after the closeness of the café.

"Whither shall we go, monsieur?"

"What is the hour?"

"It is quarter past nine."

"I shall return soon. We will walk through the streets."

They traversed street after street, byway after byway, most of them deserted and ill-lit, and not a few malodorous. The Jew looked dissatisfied. It was not his idea of enjoyment to thread the backstreets of Kairouan.

"Tell me," demanded Riccardo, "are there not some ancient anchors here?"

"The anchors of Noah? Yes, monsieur. The Arabs say that they were transported from Porto Farina by a marabout in one single night. Oh yes! they are credulous, these Arabs!"

"I should like to see them."

"For that monsieur will need day. They are very big. But the boat of Noah was big also. They lie in a courtyard. Oh yes! they will make a good picture for the machine of monsieur."

"Where are they?"

"Oh, a great distance from here!" He waved his yellow hand vaguely.

"But *where*?" asked Riccardo impatiently.

"Near to the Mosque of the Swords, monsieur."

"Well, that cannot be distant from here."

"It is closed, monsieur."

"No matter. We will walk past there and then return to the hotel. I wish to make a photograph of it some time and should like to know the way."

"But I would show monsieur to-morrow——"

"I am busy to-morrow and every other day."

The Jew evidently thought him a lunatic. He led the way to the Mosque of Swords, pallid and ghostly against the star-sown sky.

"Where are the anchors?"

"Wait, monsieur!" He walked with an air of mystery past the mosque and came to a stop by a wooden door, at which he stooped and beckoned to Riccardo.

"Put your eye to the hole, monsieur!"

Riccardo did so. Faintly visible in the starlight were some gigantic shapes which he could see were anchors of an antique pattern lying on the withered grass of an empty courtyard. Their shapes and shadows were grotesque; their presence, far from the sea in this waterless country, still more fantastic.

He withdrew from the crack and remarked: "It will make an excellent photograph. I shall certainly come here again by daylight when I have time."

"Monsieur wishes to return?"

"Yes. By the most direct route."

They started; Riccardo marking attentively every turn and landmark. Arrived once more at the Bab Djelladin, he put his hand into his pocket and drew out a five-franc piece and a franc, placing both coins in the Jew's ready palm.

"I shall return alone from here."

"But I will accompany monsieur! With gladness will I——"

"It is sufficient, Raphael. I will take thee another day."

The Jew still lingered, but evidently reasoning that there was no financial reason why he should go farther, he finally bade him good-night, and disappeared down the main street. Riccardo walked quickly back to the hotel and spoke to one of the Arab porters, with whom he was more or less friendly.

"I have something of an ague. Canst thou lend me thy burnous? I want to finish my stroll."

"Monsieur must have caught a chill: the night is hot, even sultry." He fetched his burnous with alacrity, and Riccardo wrapped himself in its folds. The Arab porter was a tall fellow, and the garment almost reached his feet. So much the better, thought Riccardo.

"Monsieur might be an Arab! It is a little fever, perhaps? If he speaks to *madame la patronne* to-morrow, she will brew him a *tisane*. When I had a fever in the winter, a *tisane* of geranium leaves made by madame herself saved my life."

It *was* hot. Riccardo felt stifled in the heavy woollen garment. As soon as he was out of sight of the hotel he turned up his trousers to their fullest capacity, leaving an expanse of bare leg, stuffed his Panama into his pocket, and pulled the hood over his ears. He made a good imitation Arab.

His progress through the Rue Saussier attracted not a single glance of curiosity. Step by step he retraced his way until he was for the second time before the Mosque of Swords. It was very silent till a cock crew, and was answered by all the cocks

in the city. Arab cocks only crow at midnight, and then with gusto. The salvo took all of five minutes, during which Riccardo carefully examined the mud wall opposite the mosque. At first sight it was entirely blank except for the rotten door which opened into the courtyard of the anchors. He walked slowly down the length of it, scrutinising it as well as he could in the darkness. At last he was rewarded, and came upon a rough plank door whitewashed so as to look like the rest of the wall. It looked like the entrance to a cattle-shed rather than that into a house. Still, he decided to knock at it, and did so. He was answered by absolute silence. If he had knocked at the door of a tomb it could not have been much stiller.

Another knock. Silence still: Riccardo bent his ear to the latch in the hope of hearing a rustle of garments or other sign of life within, but there was no sound.

Again he rapped. This time he fancied that he heard a shuffling within. Yes; he was not mistaken! He bent again, but leapt backwards at a touch on his shoulder. His nerves were unequal to the unexpected contact. Some one had come up behind him as he stood there, with no more sound than an apparition.

It was a negro, an old man, bent with age and dwarfed by nature to the stature of a child of twelve. He was regarding Riccardo with a look of mingled curiosity and cunning.

Riccardo did not know whether to give the password or not. While he hesitated, the old man pushed past him, inserted a rusty key, twisted it into the screeching lock, and opened the door. Riccardo prepared to follow, but the old man pushed him back with a harsh, croak-

ing noise. It was then that Riccardo noticed with some horror that his tongue had been cut off at the roots.

Before he could collect his wits the door had creaked to again, and was bolted from within. There was nothing to do but to fall to knocking again, and this he performed with considerable vigour.

After a long while the door was unbolted, and a woman, muffled to the eyes in a shabby black haik, stood before him. From her bent figure he judged her to be old, and this opinion was confirmed by her cracked voice. She was asking him a question, but his Arabic was as yet too elementary to understand what it might be, so he merely uttered the password given him, "Sidi bel Hassan." She peered at him from behind the thickness of her veil, and then burst into an eldritch cackle, repeating "Sidi bel Hassan!" with the proper Arab aspiration, like a wheezy parrot, over and over again. Finally she disappeared from the gloom of what appeared to be a low ante-room scarcely bigger than a rabbit-hutch, into another which was apparently pitchy dark, and returned bringing with her the negro who had slammed the door in his face a few moments before. Once again Riccardo repeated his formula. "*Iatrk sad! iatrk sad!*" she cried in a quavering voice in which there was a welcoming sound. She seized hold of his burnous, but the old man pushed her back with a force Riccardo would not have believed possible in so dwarf-like a creature. Riccardo understood that his good faith was not fully established, and bent down swiftly to trace the pentagon in the dust. It was evidently sufficient, and the negro again emitted a hoarse sound, permitting the woman to take possession

of Riccardo's hand and drag him within. The door banged to, and the old man lit an oil lantern, exhibiting a small and vaulted room, bare except for a little matting on the floor. The second doorway led into another room, a poor little living-room with its gigantic double bed surmounted by a star and crescent, a loom for weaving carpets, a cracked Arab picture, and some sacks probably containing compressed dates. The whole had the slightly greasy smell of camels'-hair cloth. Presently the old man shuffled out, leaving Riccardo alone with the old woman, and the rickety door closed behind him. The old dame threw off her haik, exposing a repulsively ugly though kindly face. She was a mulatto, clearly of considerable age, but active still and talkative, for she kept up a constant flow of Arabic, of which Riccardo was only able to understand a few words. But she was visibly saying pleasant things, and twice she came over to him and patted his cheek with her hand. It was not a clean hand, it was not a soft hand, but it was friendly. She occupied herself with fanning a charcoal fire in an earthenware pot into a red glow with a grass fan, and Riccardo saw she was making him a cup of coffee. While he drank it, seated on a red cushion which she had dragged off the bed for him, she crouched on her heels, watching him with senile gaiety and interest.

Gradually, however, she relapsed into a somnolent silence, and her white head began to nod. Riccardo waited with growing impatience. Would no one come to whom he could explain his errand? It was now fully twenty minutes since he had entered the house. He was worn out with the vigils and anxieties of the past few nights, and a profound sleepiness overtook

him at the sight of the sleeping beldame. He fought it off with aching eyeballs, his eyelids kept rigidly from falling, and watched the charcoal sink down into a soft greyness. The old woman began to snore. Riccardo strained his ears for returning footsteps.

At last he heard them, and the sound of some one unfastening the door. The old man entered, but the old woman slept on. Stumbling to his feet in answer to the dwarf's signs, Riccardo threw on the burnous and prepared to follow him.

They were out of doors again, and Riccardo followed the old man at a slow pace through several byways. He could almost have slept as he walked, in spite of the freshening influence of the air. They came to a stop: the negro tapped softly at a nail-studded door, and Riccardo found himself admitted. As the door closed again, he noticed that his guide was left outside. A slovenly mulatto girl led him across a dark courtyard to some stairs, and up into the upper storey. In a few moments he stood in a richly-furnished room. His weary eyes took in something of the mad confusion of it. Paris and the Orient met in its uncomfortable luxury. A fine old brass lamp illuminated the untidy, scented whole, the *nacre* stools, the Louis xv. sofa, the gilded clock, the painted Arab brackets, heavy carpets, and tumbled, embroidered cushions. A soiled pair of satin slippers lay on a low divan, a lace peignoir, also soiled, was flung over a table. In the recess was another four-poster bed, but this was of fine workmanship, the ironwork was gilded, and the bed-hangings of costly materials.

The room was empty. The gilt clock which indicated, with touching optimism, nine o'clock, whether of morning or evening it was not clear, ticked with

silly dignity and emphasis. He was interrupted in his survey by the reappearance of the mulatto girl with a trayful of odd-looking cakes, covered with white and pink sugar and ornamented with adhesive crescents of gilt paper, and a glass of sherbet.

"More waiting!" thought Riccardo. He sat down on the divan, carefully removing the satin slippers, and after a few seconds felt his eyelids once more begin to droop. He resisted the impulse and kept them up by an effort of will that could do more than muscular energy in his present wearied state. The clock ticked solemnly. His thoughts gradually wandered from the effort to keep himself awake. They became dreams, wild dreams in which a tongueless negro mowed at him. Then they became a heavy sleep. His head sank back against the cushions of the divan.

An hour had elapsed before a woman, walking wearily, entered the room, heavily veiled in the Kairouanese fashion. She gave a surprised glance around her, and then her eyes fell on the divan.

"*Eiwa!*" she exclaimed, with a hastily suppressed laugh. Then she approached on tiptoe, moving slowly, like a belled cat, so that her anklets might not clink. The young Sicilian lay in a profound slumber, his eyes ringed beneath with black, his clear skin whitened by fatigue. She threw off her veil, and gazed at him half humorously, half tenderly.

"Poor child," she murmured in Arabic, and bending over him gave him a light caress, listening to his regular breathing, feeling the warmth of his body.

"*Ia aini!*" she said under her breath, and then,

with a maternal gesture, placed a rug carefully over him and extinguished the lamp. That done, she tiptoed out of the room, catching up the heavy haik as she went, and darkness and silence brooded over the house.

CHAPTER VII

RICCARDO awoke to find the sun streaming through the doorway which connected with the open arcade, right into his eyes; and a mulatto girl of coffee-coloured complexion, and a broad grin displaying two rows of perfect teeth, standing beside the divan. Her attitude expressed intense amusement.

"You sleep!" she exclaimed in primitive French, and burst into a peal of laughter.

It was self-evident. Riccardo felt sick with rage.

"*Santo Dio!* What is the time?" he exclaimed.

She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. Her French was limited. His visible annoyance provoked her into fresh mirth. As soon as she could speak, she said—

"Madame—*aux bains maures!*" This she had evidently learnt by heart. Madame was at the baths! Then there was a madame, and she had left an explanation. Could it be Mabrouka? If so, she must be in Kairouan.

The girl cheerfully picked up a reed broom, stopping from time to time to pick her teeth, and swept about the room, making an effort to reduce its untidiness. She wore a silk kerchief tied into a knot on her forehead, a short skirt of yellow, apparently also tied and pinned together, a short-sleeved bodice, and a circus-like green velvet zouave heavily trimmed with

tarnished gold braid. Her plump brown feet were shoeless. Whenever she met his eyes, which was frequently, she was overcome by a fresh paroxysm of giggles.

Presently she dropped her broom and ran out of the room. Riccardo thought it behoved him to find some one and to demand an explanation, at any rate to attempt to get a message to the hotel. He nearly ran into an enormous negro sitting in the sunny entrance. The negro rose, and hurriedly barred the way to the staircase, so effectually that Riccardo had to relinquish the attempt to force a passage. He was a prisoner then.

The mulatto girl re-entered a moment afterwards, and shook an admonitory finger at him as at a naughty child. Under her arm she bore a bowl full of water, and in this Riccardo contrived to make his ablutions. Meanwhile anxiety had retaken possession of him. As soon as his absence was discovered at the hotel, what would be thought? He chafed at the delay, and had the insane idea of rushing at the negro and overpowering him. Yet, what good would it do him, after all, to leave the house without making a further attempt to achieve his object? If only he had not been such a besotted fool as to sleep!

His attendant was not content with a bird's-eye view of him; she came closer, and subjected his clothing and person to a minute scrutiny, evidently finding him a most humorous spectacle. But the attentions of the young person were diverted by a sound in the courtyard below. She hurriedly left him, and, slipping on her wooden clogs at the door, clod-clodded down the stone stairs.

In the next instant a woman stood in the sunlight of the doorway, dressed in the long black folds of a

Kairouanese haik, funereal as a figure on a Greek urn. Instinct told him that it was Mabrouka : Mabrouka at last !

She paused, and through her veil he guessed that she was smiling.

“ Mabrouka ! ”

She advanced towards him and held out two little hands, heavily stained with henna.

“ Ric-car-do ! ” There was the same pretty, broken wait between the syllables that he had found so adorable. He took the little hands, his heart beating suddenly faster under the magic of her proximity, her perfume. He felt forgiving.

“ *C'est véritablement toi, mon petit !* I have joy in this meeting ! ”

“ It is I. ”

She turned to pull a linen curtain across the doorway, and then took his hands again and patted them.

“ You have forgotten Mabrouka, *hein !* in these last days ? ”

“ I could never forget her even if I would. ”

She kept his hands in hers, and drew him down beside her on the divan.

“ And last night—how sleepy you were, *mon cher !* I stoop—so ! I kiss you—so ! ” she made the sound “ and still you sleep ! oh, but like the dead ! I go out, very softly, and you sigh in your sleep—so ! And I know you dream of the pretty cousin, and I laugh and go away ! ”

“ I was an absolute fool ! I have been up for several nights this week, and I felt as if all the accumulated sleep I had lost overtook me when I sat on your divan. ”

“ Ah—poor boy ! Through too much love, *hein ?* ”

“ Through too much anxiety. ”

"Anxiety?"

"My cousin!"

"Ah—" she repeated thoughtfully; "about this affair of your cousin!"

"Yes. You know. You must have heard——"

"Yes, yes, I did hear."

He drew out her letter and placed it in her lap.

"I need your help this time, desperately."

She relinquished his hands and moved the tip of her small red leather shoe up and down.

He briefly detailed the circumstances of Annunziata's disappearance.

She made no comment.

"And now I have come to you," he ended.

"How can I help you, *mon cher*?"

"But you will!"

"It is impossible," she said briefly, rising.

"You promised your help."

"For *you*, if I could. But I warned you. And what has your cousin to do with either that or my promise?" she asked evasively.

"Everything. You know to whom her disappearance is due." He made the accusation at a venture.

She gave a short laugh and walked away. "I know! You must be mad."

"If not directly, indirectly."

She made an impatient movement. "I know nothing! How should I know?"

"You can get to know a great deal."

"What nonsense is this!" She turned on him pettishly. "What childish talk! Am I to know other women's lovers? Am I to know where they tryst, where they hide? It is with her lover that your cousin has gone away! She was love-ripe, he was

love-ready, and the moon was waning. The feet of lovers are too swift for me."

Even Sicilian jealousy did not respond to this. Riccardo shrugged his shoulders, and returned, "That is a foolish lie of thine, Mabrouka."

She whirled round upon him, overwhelmed by fury, her two arms lifted. Then she dropped them, and changed her tone suddenly to one of soothing pity.

"You almost make me to hate you! My dear, my poor boy—what foolishness in your brain to imagine I can help you in this *affaire*! She has either eloped or been kidnapped—*voilà tout*! She will discover herself, doubtless. Until then you may as well hunt the dunes of the desert for a lost diamond!"

Riccardo did not change his expression.

She sat down beside him caressingly.

"*Voyons, mon cher*, I am not the person to ask. There is one man to whom to apply, because he is so powerful, because he has eyes in every street, in every city. He might help you."

"Who?"

"Si Ismael," she breathed.

"For a good reason!"

"Because he is powerful," she repeated; "powerful as an *afrit*."

"And he would ask something in return."

"Perhaps. And why not?"

"Because I cannot give it."

"Riccardo, my dear, you are foolish!"

"I should be worse than foolish if I were to go to the scoundrel who has abducted my cousin and say, 'If you will kindly return the lady you have stolen, I will do your dirty work for you.' Holy God! that would be obliging on my part!"

"There is no question of his stealing. He is not her lover! But there is a question of his help."

"Mabrouka!" he exclaimed, with anger.

"*Eh bien!*—what can I say but the truth? I am a stupid woman."

"You know as well as I that Si Ismael has hidden her to force my hand. The Almighty only knows what other devil's work he is contemplating! . . . I can denounce him to the French Government."

"Bah! And destroy yourself also! What proofs can you bring?"

It was true. He could adduce not a single tangible proof.

"Be sensible, my dear," she said in her cajoling, broken accent. "I love you—you know it. I will not let you hurl yourself against these impossibilities. Listen! A little while ago you were threatened—with—with a disaster. It was Mabrouka who stopped it. It was Mabrouka who said, 'Wait, he will come to his senses. Other things may happen to make him—think!'"

"Then you are in league with him against me! And the other things, politely referred to, included the sacrifice of a defenceless girl!"

"Who said such a thing? Not I. I merely want to prove that I am your friend. As I love you, I advise wisdom." There was a ring of sincerity in her last words which was not lost on him.

His eyes fell. He was thinking. He was playing for big stakes with perilous weapons. Dare he use that which lay so dangerously near? Would not the blade turn itself against him in his hand? Susceptible as he was to her glamour, in spite of his love for the woman for whom he was fighting, dare he use the weapon of sex?

Thought is a subtle fluid. The note of tenderness in her last words had changed the atmosphere. Mabrouka regarded him from beneath the blackness of her enshrouding veil. Then she bent over him so that the softness of her breast touched his, and put two scarlet-stained hands on his shoulders. Her childish naiveté, the charm of her abandon, her perfume, were not without their effect on him. He felt the warm numbness of contact creep like an insidious fluid through his veins.

"Go to him, my dear! You are not safe, believe me, believe me!"

"I will fight him till my dying day rather than give in."

"See here!" she lifted a corner of her haik, and exhibited her bare throat. "I show you my neck. You have never seen my face—*hein?* It is so with Ismael. He shows his hand, his neck, but his face never. And when he shows his face, you die."

She spoke with intense earnestness, and paused; then, ending with a trill of laughter, pulled his head towards herself, pressing it against the warm flesh of her throat. A momentary madness of the senses passed through him, and, before he realised it, he had caught her in his two arms, hotly. She slipped with adroitness through his grasp, and fought him off, and then lay back on the divan, arranging her veil and dress.

"Ric-car-do!" she said in a low voice.

He did not stir, already afraid of her and himself.

"Riccardo, *mon petit, mon cher!* Come! Come here, very close!"

He was drawn to her against his wisdom, telling

himself stoutly that he was using guile with her. Yet in his heart he feared for the victory.

"Riccardo!"

Her arms encircled his neck as he knelt beside the divan; her subtle perfume clutched at his reason, dragging it below the surface. The blood rushed to his face, and beat in his ears.

"You love me still a little?" she said in his ear. "You love me, *mon petit*? Thou hast not forgotten?"

"It is you who cannot love me, since you refuse to help me."

"It is because I love thee that I refuse, stupid one! Thou art a child, a defiant child, that thou wilt not give in! Such a small matter! I would see thee rich—so rich! richer than any one in the Regency. I would see thee loved, better loved than any one in the Regency! *Aie!* but what jewels thou wilt give me then! pearls black as night to remind thee of nights that were pearl. And no soul will guess from whence thou hast thy good fortune. He will never betray thee. He is wise—very wise."

"I do not want riches that come in the way of treachery."

"Treachery!" She laughed as at the most delicious joke. "To whom, then? To the French, when thou art a Sicilian? To what? to whom?"

"I am a Bastiagnini," said Riccardo, slipping the heavy bracelets up and down her bare arm. "The Bastiagnini do not pay prices for freedom."

"*Eiwa, eiwa!* That sounds very pretty, very grand. But what of throwing over promises? what of ridding one's self of an obligation directly it becomes a burden?"

"Who has done so?"

"You and your uncle," she replied boldly, returning his caress as if to velvet the words.

"I made no promise; and his, made under stress, was more than kept, his obligation twice paid."

She was silent. The gilt clock ticked slowly, and, with unblushing mendacity, pointed to four o'clock. The heat was growing intense. The light was stained to a subdued orange by the unbleached linen through which it filtered, and through the doorway came the sound of women's voices, chattering in Arabic, the splash of water, and snatches of a plaintive song from a neighbouring roof.

"You are fighting for a figure in smoke—for a nothing!" she continued softly after a while, in the tender voice which had in it an inflection almost maternal. "We are fighting for something real. We are in the right—our cause is freedom, not yours. There is power to be got—for some one. You are young, you should be ambitious——"

He made no reply, but continued to slip her bracelets up and down her arm. It was on his lips to tell her that something more than national feeling was involved; that there was more between them than nationality. What she and Si Ismael were asking of him was to be a renegade, not to his faith, but to what was deeper than his faith—his race, his civilisation. The price she offered, whether they failed or won, was to be riches, the restoration of the girl he was to marry; and if he wanted her, a mistress into the bargain. Every Sicilian is polygamous by nature, and the paradox did not even occur to him, who thought of such matters without the hypocrisy of the North.

The women's voices outside grew shriller. A dispute had apparently arisen. Peace was as suddenly restored

in a peal of laughter, and above the lull sounded the broken and plaintive song.

"See here, my dear! A little while you asked me something—to stay with you, not to dance—to be just entirely for you."

She drew him down with both her arms, and spoke in a caressing undertone.

"Well, supposing I said yes. Supposing I were to dance for you, and only for you; to give you a thousand nights instead of one? *Dites?* You would be happy? I know so much more of love than your women. We would leave Tunis, and go south to Gafsa, by way of Gabés. Do you know Gafsa? . . . The desert lies around Gafsa burning like a yellow sky in the sun; sand that is soft and slippery and warm to lie in at night, dunes upon dunes, undulating like the body of a woman. We would sometimes have a tent out there. You would hear the jackals, my dear, yapping at night, and the wind blowing like a breath from the hot sea at Gabés; and we would push aside the tent-door and look out on a big, big sky full of stars. And Saïd should make us poems. And we would stay in the cool oases at Gafsa with the mountains to left and to right, and walk under the date-palms, the male and the female palms, the apricot-trees and the olives—it is a garden down there like Paradise. There is a little coffee-house, *là-bas*, built of clay, that is cool as an earthen pitcher. I know a flute-player who plays there, like magic he plays, so that the coffee-drinkers spend a day and think it the space between one prayer-time and the next. Every one is gay. There is the click of dominoes all day long in the shade, and some one

always singing. Outside the café there is a lemon-grove, and in spring it smells like heaven itself. And you should sit there in the day, and at night return to me. I should have prepared the meal, and we would eat—as at Carthage, and I would amuse you, *si bien, si bien !* ”

She stroked his hair. “Love is to be learnt. You know a little, a little—but you have much to learn yet. I will teach you, well-beloved. *Quelle vie !* Then, when you are tired of me, and need your wife—for you will marry soon, *n'est-ce pas ?*—you shall say, and I shall go far, far away, so nothing shall be spoilt. For a meal eaten is a meal eaten. And when you think of that time which you had with me, you will say: ‘Ah, I was happy!’ When you are old you will say it. And in Tunis, in an old street, vaulted to keep out the sun, there is a house with a green door, and an ancient lattice, and a fig-tree growing over the wall, that will cost only a few hundred francs. To that you can come when you are tired, when you are sad, when you have lost delight in the savour of everyday things; when women no longer please you, and I will make you laugh, and never speak of those things in your presence. Your wife will not know how to do this; besides, you may weary of her. . . . And you will need nothing, because you will be rich! You shall buy me jewels, and I will dance in them for you, making them shiver like the scales of snakes when they dance to the charmer’s flute and drum in the Place Halfaouine by the Café of Pleasure. Have you never drunk coffee there? Oh, you would like it! besides, *I* sing there. And how, do you think? In a brass thing they call the gramophone. Oh yes! Ali Habib asked me one day to sing into it the love-

song which Said made me, and it repeats it evermore on a wheel. There are inventions so wonderful, to-day!

"It is true that I am no longer very young. But I will find you a young girl who shall learn from you all that I had taught you. For I am older than thou, and a meal eaten is a meal eaten . . ."

Riccardo let her henna-stained fingers stray about his hair, his neck, and stared at her as if in a trance. A warm delirium sapped his powers of action and of thought. He bent closer, making his arms meet around her, so that she was nested in his embrace.

"Mabrouka! Mabrouka! Let me see thee unveiled!"

"If I lift my veil, I break my vow, and am cursed, overlooked!"

"A vow made to a lover!"

"No, no."

"Lift it!"

"And bring bad fortune on me and thee!"

He crushed her in his vehemence. "Mabrouka, Mabrouka! I cannot rest until it is lifted."

"Promise, and thou canst," she said, after a long pause, speaking slowly.

The blood surged in his ears. "What can I promise?"

"To do what he asks thee, this little thing, and take what he offers."

"I cannot."

"Then *I* cannot." Her tone was apprehensive. "Take care!"

"Let me, let me!"

"If thou promise. Till then I give thee nothing."

"Love—what is this of love? What is thine worth? Thou refuseth whatever I ask."

"It is because I love thee that I would have thee choose the safe way."

Something, he could not tell what, rang false in her assurance, but it roused him to a desire of domination that he had never felt before.

"Thou dost not love me. Thine is a dancer's love—on the lips."

She was silent.

"For pity's sake, Mabrouka . . ."

"If thou promise."

In answer he pulled at the black silk that covered her face. It rent; she screamed and turned away before the fluttering black had been wrenched from her grasp, burying her face in the cushions. Riccardo felt himself seized from behind. At his mistress's cry the negro outside had run in. Pinioned, Riccardo could do nothing but utter maledictions. He had seen nothing; he had lost all.

With one hand she reached for the torn haik and replaced it.

Riccardo cursed himself and her. In his madness he had destroyed everything.

Mabrouka laughed unpleasantly, and gave an order in Arabic. The negro left, releasing Riccardo, who stood beside the divan flushed with passion and disappointment.

"You are not wise, my friend. Had you remarked it, Beda had a *keris* in his hand. Had I lifted a finger it would have been between thy shoulder-blades!"

She got up, still trembling, and, kicking off her slippers, walked up and down with bare feet; lithe, stormy, and silent.

Neither spoke.

"So mine is a dancer's love!" she burst out at last passionately. "Pray, when have I asked thee for money?"

He made no reply.

She paced up and down unceasingly.

Then she suddenly came to a stop before him, and faced him in a tense silence.

"Look then, fool!"

Without warning, she suddenly threw off the torn veil and confronted him.

"You have asked for ill fortune for thee and me—take it!" She stooped, rolled the haik together, and struck him in the face with it. It fell to the floor.

Riccardo was dumb with astonishment.

In spite of the fact that her face was distorted with anger, it was beautiful with an odd, uneven kind of beauty. She was no longer very young, but her skin, never exposed to the sun, was creamy and fine. Her face was broad at the forehead, shaping abruptly into a somewhat pointed chin. Her eyes, darkened with kohl, were large and heavy-lidded, and in these the lowering hatred of her expression was concentrated. The skin of the eyelids and underneath the eyes was of a natural purple like a grape-stain. The mouth was large and fairly full, but mobile. Finally, the delicate skin of either cheek was contracted about a brand in the form of a cross, evidently healed for many years, but leaving a cruciform scar so deep that it might have been tattooed into the flesh.

"Speak, fool!" she cried, blazing still.

But Riccardo's mouth was dry. He was overwhelmed.

Suddenly her anger left her. She looked at the fallen haik and at him, with a dawning realisation of what she had done. Then, with a gesture of absolute

despair, she flung herself, face downwards, on the divan.

His power of action returned to him. He caught her up, and covered her undefended face with kisses—her mouth, her eyes, her scarred cheeks. She suffered it as if she were oblivious to it, but presently clutched at him and burst into dry sobbing, catching her breath, crying like a terrified child.

"What have you done! I am lost! *Je suis perdue!*"

He caressed and soothed her. He loved her, he would never leave her, nothing should harm her. They would go to Gafsa, they would leave everything. He lavished love-words on her in Sicilian, in French.

Gradually her paroxysm ceased. She pushed him away, and, regarding him narrowly, lay passive under the kisses which he rained upon her hand.

"And thou wilt go to him, then?" she said.

"To whom?" he asked absently, concerned only with her, and imagining that she alluded to Gafsa.

"To Si Ismael," she breathed.

He looked troubled. "I cannot, dear one. I have already said it."

"You cannot?"

"What need is there?"

"You mean to let her go?"

"*Dio!* no. We must get her back together, thou and I."

Her eyes smouldered in her pale face.

He kissed her. "Thou and I, my soul."

She laughed harshly. "Do not mistake me. Either thou obeyest Si Ismael, or I leave thee."

After her surrender he had not looked for this.

"The other way is easiest. Thou knowest Si Ismael. Thou knowest the means. Find out for

me, and when we have released her all will be well."

She laughed again, and withdrew her hand. "It was for this then that I have brought ill-fortune on myself. I asked thee for nothing. I gave thee what thou didst demand." She narrowed her eyes passionately until they were gleaming slits. "Like thy uncle thou takest without payment, like the dogs of Jews in the Hara, that are spit upon in the streets."

"Mabrouka! This is not reason."

"Thou to talk of reason! Did I talk of reason when I lifted my veil?"

In an agony he attempted to approach her. She evaded his embrace.

"Riccardo!" Her eyes were wet with tears. "Is thy love less than mine? I had thy life in my hands a moment ago. Thou hast mine to lose or to have. Choose!"

He wavered, and saw steel gleam in her eyes.

"Choose!" she said again.

The doubt that had beset him when he was with Si Ismael swept over his soul. Was he a fool to refuse? Had he been fighting for phantom principles? Was his promise to the dead man valid? Were the obstacles that held him back so insurmountable as he had imagined?

The gay and sad little song of the idler on the neighbouring roof-top was wafted in to him through the curtained door; hedonistic, fatalistic, melancholy.

Words formed themselves on his lips. He flung himself down beside her and kissed her fiercely.

She knew that the victory was hers.

"Thou wilt go to him?"

"I will go."

"Allah be with thee," she returned, drawing a deep breath.

"And thou?" he asked, after a moment of silence.

"I shall wait for thee here, beloved."

"To-night?"

"To-night."

He rose abruptly. A vast disappointment seized his soul. She watched him curiously.

"I must return to the hotel."

"You shall be accompanied!" She clapped her hands, and gave the negro Beda a command. "He will take you into the Rue Saussier. From there you will know the way. Seek Si Ismael this afternoon."

"How shall I find him?"

"Beda will wait for you by the Mosque of Swords."

He followed the negro down the steps into the courtyard. The sun beat downwards and upwards on to the stones. There was a general scurry and rustle of disappearing women as he entered it, and shrieks of dismay.

There was no perfume here, only the homely smell of cookery, oil and garlic. But a magnolia tree leaning against the hot wall sent him a sweeter breath, reminding him of that which grew in the second courtyard in Tunis, where the flamingoes flapped their wings in silken durance, in alien surroundings. A breeze blew into his face.

He paused for a moment, then, turning suddenly, rushed up the steps, the negro after him.

Mabrouka, from the divan, looked at him with surprise.

"Forgive me. . . . I have come back to tell you——"

She looked at him without stirring a muscle.

He struggled with his words.

"I have chosen——"

"Yes, yes. To go to him. . . . All will be well.
Your cousin——"

He brought out his meaning in confusion. "I will go to him—but, not to surrender!" Like Joseph the tempted, he fled from her presence, down the stairway, and into the morning sun.

CHAPTER VIII

Now that Gioconda was alone, she habitually took her *petit déjeuner* in the dining-room instead of in her room, and on the very Friday morning on which Riccardo awoke in an Arab house, she came down at half-past eight and sat down to her coffee. Riccardo was not there as usual; she concluded that he had gone out earlier with Giovanni. The only other person visible beside the waiter was the American lady of the night before, an energetic, good-looking woman, with an indomitable mouth and clothes to match. She smiled in answer to Gioconda's bow, and shot her a penetrating glance. She was finishing a solid breakfast, from the egg-shells by her side, and soon afterwards, setting down her empty coffee-cup, she arose and rustled over to the girl.

"You are Italian, aren't you? Do you speak English? . . . Why, now, isn't that nice! You've such a pretty accent. I hope you'll pardon my speaking to you, but you see I'm the only woman of my party, and I see you're the only one of yours. Excuse me, but *are* you that poor girl that Madame Perrier spoke to me about last night, whose sister has so mysteriously disappeared?"

She had seated herself as she spoke, and rested her chin on her palms.

Gioconda shyly admitted the fact.

"Well now, I'm sorry to hear that! It is a terrible thing for you. It's the most scandalous thing I ever heard. I should like to know of such a thing happening in an American colony! The fuss there would be about it! Of course your Consul will do what he can for you. If there were a United States Consul in this city, I'd go and see him and get him to help."

Gioconda thanked her in what English she could command.

"If you haven't the prettiest accent! . . . I hear that young Italian who voyaged in our car coming down was your sister's *fiancé*. Such a nice-looking boy, too: I feel real sorry for him. Where is he?"

"I suppose he got up early, madame."

"My name is Moore, Mrs. Grace Moore, of New York City. . . . My husband was an early worm this morning too, and Van Deep, who's travelling with us. I suppose they've taken Yussef and gone off to see mosques and tombs. We're just left!" She laughed heartily. "As we're two lonely women, what would you say to taking a little turn together in half an hour?"

There was little that Gioconda could do but assent. Besides, it amused her to listen to this woman of the New World, whose life was so different from her own, and who admitted her, a mere stranger, into free-and-easy familiarity at once. In half an hour she descended to find her new friend already waiting for her, parasol in hand and Paris hat on head.

"Are you staying long?—well, if that isn't too bad of me: of course you're bound to wait until your sister is found. . . . Kairouan's not a place I'd care to be in a long while. Fleas! why if any one had told me, I should never have faced it. My Keating's has run

out, too. . . . No, we're going to-morrow—we should have gone to-day, only these Eissowa people won't perform any day but Friday, and Yussef *made* us stay for that. Have you seen Yussef? He's fine, isn't he! He's a lovely man: we picked him up in Constantinople, and he's been along with us ever since. I fell in love with his clothes; and then he speaks seven languages! His mother was a Levantine. . . . You know we daren't disobey him, he sulks if we do. I wish we could ship him home after this trip and keep him in the back yard to look at. I'm afraid they'd make us pay duty on him. . . . Aren't the Arabs dears? Didn't I hear you speak Arabic to the *concierge*? Well, say, if that isn't clever of you! . . . What, you *live* in Tunis? Isn't it hot in summer? New York is bad enough! . . . Are you a Catholic? . . . So am I; I was converted last fall. It was so useful in Rome, and I'd always wanted to be. I feel so restful now, and I never did before. . . . Oh, do please speak a little forcible Arabic to that odious old beggarman who is shaking a stump at us! It is worse than Naples. I hate the place, don't you? Why, of course *you* do: you must pardon me, I keep forgetting your trouble."

Mrs. Moore walked slowly, and talked much, so that they had not gone very far by the time they returned to the hotel to find that the two Americans and the dragoman had come back and were waiting to see if Mrs. Moore would come out to help them take some photographs.

She introduced Gioconda volubly, adding—

"Signorina Scarfi has kindly promised to join our party at the Eissowa performance this afternoon, Frederick; and I'm most grateful, because goodness

only knows what one mayn't see in these Oriental entertainments!"

Her husband looked at her with humorous indulgence. "My dear girl," he drawled, "as I've told you before, it's not a dance but a religious ceremony."

"Whether it's a dance or not I'm grateful she's promised to come. No, I'm not coming out now—I'm too shaken up with the journey and my bad night; and I saw quite enough of the mosques yesterday evening. You take Yussef and go right on by yourselves. Why, Yussef! what have you been doing to your eye?"

"I had the misfortune to fall last night, madame."

"You should have rubbed butter into it right away. You look all anyhow."

She waved a valedictory hand to them. Gioconda saw Riccardo, and, excusing herself, went to meet him.

"You were out early to-day!" she said. "I was beginning to wonder where you were."

"Isn't Giovanni with you?"

"No; I've been for a walk with our American—her name is Mrs. Moore."

He laughed; inwardly relieved to discover that she did not know of his all-night absence.

"She is very friendly."

"Expansively so, I should think."

"She talks a great deal, and says rather odd things sometimes, but I like her."

"The English and the Americans are all cranks, especially the women."

"She made me promise to go with them to the Eissowa this afternoon," she continued. "You will come too, won't you? From what Giovanni says——"

"Oh, I'll come," he answered somewhat absently. He had made up his mind to go to Si Ismael after sun-

down, when the likelihood of his being at home would be greater, and to challenge him directly with Annunziata's abduction. He would first of all take San Calogero into his confidence, and have him wait, with the Maltese digger and Giuseppe, outside the house. If Riccardo did not emerge after two hours, they were to force a way into it. If this seemed impracticable and impossible, they were to employ the last resort—call in the police, and have the house watched, and finally searched. The discouraging possibility in this scheme was that it was quite on the cards that the police might refuse to take any steps in the matter, especially as they had been enjoined to act with caution in the present critical state of disaffection. Si Ismael's loyalty had never been impugned; on account of his power the Government had always maintained a friendly attitude towards him. On his side, Riccardo could allege nothing but suspicion: and he and his cousins were Sicilians—of the race regarded as a big cuckoo in the nest of the French colony, and only tolerated as an unavoidable evil.

The afternoon had been blazingly hot. The heat vapour of the early day had been absorbed into the pitiless blue of the sky; the sun beat down upon the white, flat roofs and tortuous streets. Figures muffled in white sat or lay close to the wall on the shady side of the street. The water-seller, the vendor of lemonade and aniseed water, the merchant with trayfuls of cool, damp honey-cakes, sold their wares readily. Here and there smokers of the forbidden kif sat in that luxurious coma induced by the herb which makes the mind only sensible to the influence of such subtle pleasures of the senses as music, perfumes and colour, running water

and green shade. But these were, for the most part, gathered together in one café: the pious do not approve of them. In this café there was little spoken, and on the cool matting lay or squatted dreamers of Paradise, wild-flowers placed in water on a low table beside them, and a cunning player of the flute, also bemused with the herb, playing quaint roulades and trills on his henna-dyed reed. Only in the houses could one hear the swift thrust of the shuttle and the heavy thud-thud of the comb as the women worked at their wooden looms. For in the city of mosques women work while men sleep—and no one weeps for it.

At noonday the mosques had been full, and the pious had listened to the weekly expounding of the Koran by this or the other learned *imam*. Nor are the mosques ever entirely deserted. As in the cathedrals of Southern Italy, there are always two or three gathered together in the name of prayer.

The hot hours went by. A blind beggar in a stained green robe who had been thrice to Mecca as a mendicant pilgrim, and had scorched in the sun since daybreak, fell asleep as he sat, his monotonous cry to Allah that men might be merciful stilled at last. A madman entered one of the cafés, mowed and kissed his hand to the wall and was given pence by somnolent customers who dozed again when he had passed. He too was holy, for the hand of God had dropped a curtain between his reason and the world, and in the sanctuary of that curtain the mad are thought to overhear some of the secrets of Allah. Saints are as numerous as mosques in Kairouan, which, according to the prophecy, is to succeed Mecca and Alexandria when both have successively fallen before the infidel.

After six the shadows grew longer, the heat less

intense. Mrs. Moore invited Gioconda and Riccardo—Giovanni was still absent—to have tea with her in the English fashion in the salon. Riccardo could talk little English, but Van Deep, one of the Americans, could converse with him in French fairly fluently, and insisted on discussing Italian socialism. Tea was brought to an end, however, by Yussef, who announced that they must start if they wished to see the Eissowa.

Riccardo was impatient that Giovanni had not appeared. It was imperative that he should explain everything to him before he could attempt to approach Si Ismael.

The *zaouia* or college of the brotherhood of the Eissowa is not far from the hotels and French quarter. A dusty road to the left leads to it, turning off outside the walls of the city. A courtyard surrounded with rooms for pupils and disciples forms the *zaouia* itself; the largest, opposite the entrance, being the mosque where the rites of the cult have place every week. Even before they had reached the gate which admitted them through a vestibule to the interior, the foreigners could hear the thudding resonance of the bendirs. A blind boy was selling tightly bound bunches of orange-blossom by the entrance, each bud pierced through by a splinter of bamboo in lieu of a stalk. Riccardo gave him a ten centime piece, and took a bunch for Gioconda, but the child handed him a second, which he retained in his own hand. As they went past the Arabs loitering in the courtyard, Van Deep asked Riccardo if he had ever remarked that, with the addition of a minaret, most mosques are built precisely on the plan of an Arab house.

Yussef, with an air of almightiness not lessened by

his discoloured eye, elbowed a way through into the mosque. It was a poor little place, with few decorations. To the left was a thick grille, from which women who had reached years of discretion were permitted to watch, listen and applaud, unseen. A square of columns ran round the interior, and oil-lamps, not a few dripping, were suspended from the roof. In one corner stood a rack containing knives and thin rapiers. In the centre of the place, on the matting, sat a number of musicians and singers chanting unmelodiously to the accompaniment of the bendirs. They looked weary and expressionless.

Yussef made an incredible fuss over procuring chairs and ranging them where his patrons could secure an uninterrupted view of the proceedings, and the Moores made no attempt to lower their voices either in comment or complaint. But the singers and players took not the smallest notice. Only one man seemed even aware of their presence, and in him Riccardo recognised the cake-seller Ali. His eyes were fixed on Yussef with an intensity of hate which Yussef, the successful lover, condescended to notice by twirling his braggadoccio moustaches.

The droning music with its accompaniment of bendirs, without enthusiasm or melody, went on almost perfunctorily. It seemed interminable. Mrs. Moore yawned, and remarked that if this were all she would never have stayed another day to see it.

But upon Riccardo the monotony of the music exercised a fascination, and induced a semi-hypnotic quiescence of spirit, to which the smell of the perfumed oil and the insidious scent of the orange-flowers he had put into the lapel of his coat partly contributed. He noticed the little blind flower-seller come in a moment

later and place himself with a smile beside some other boys of his own age that stood beside the entrance or squatted on the matting.

Yussef pointed out to him the Sheikh, the head on earth of the brotherhood. He sat among the musicians, his tall stature evident even in a sitting posture. He had a patriarchal aspect; his turban was big, his beard and eyebrows snowy-white; his nose was beaked as if Phœnician blood ran in his veins; his mouth was thin-lipped and cruel. Perhaps, thought Riccardo, a far-back ancestor of his had sacrificed to Baal in this very spot, placing children into the slippery arms of the cruel god that they might roll into terrible death upon his white-hot lap.

In answer to a sign from the Sheikh, the music became fiercer, quicker, vivid. The bendirs were thundered upon till it seemed as if the vibrant skin would split. The old man rose, and many of the singers with him, keeping time to the rhythm with a jumping movement. The men and children fell into line; old men, young men, youths and boys were ranged into two rows indiscriminate of height. The Sheikh began a dance before them, planting his bare foot, in which the veins were swollen, every now and then with a thud before him in the attitude of a fencing lunge. With cries, the two rows followed his example. The sound of the bare feet thudding and stamping in time together was almost as loud as the singing. The old man turned, and placing himself in the first row between the two small boys, evidently novices, he incited them to fresh efforts. As the lunge forward was made, there was a cry of "Oah!" from the dancers which grew louder and louder and less human and more ferocious, till it sounded

like the roar of wild animals. One, indeed, barked like a jackal, another made a sound like an angry camel, another the high kreening note of a vulture. The scene became vague and sinister to Riccardo; he seemed to see beasts lurking behind the wild faces of the dancers. The old Sheikh alone preserved a satanic coldness.

Suddenly one of the dancers, shaking and convulsive, rushed from the ranks into the centre and threw off his upper garments, leaving nothing on his body but his wide Turkish pantaloons. He was a man of good physique, but every muscle was twitching as if in agony, his face was the face of one possessed, and his eyes were glazed and fixed. An assistant went to the rack and handed him a thin rapier. With a dramatic gesture he ran it through his throat, still shaking convulsively and uttering cries. Another and yet another were handed to him. He ran one through his cheek, a second through his arm. Ali, the cake-seller, followed his example, but whereas the first man had not shed a drop, blood ran down the cake-seller's body till he looked inhuman. Another devotee was rolling on the spikes of the prickly pear, till he was a raw mass. A youth beside him, with shut eyes and head thrown back, was devouring a sheet of thin glass with a raucous sound in his throat. A third held a live scorpion to his lips, and then ate it. Riccardo began to feel physical sickness, his head swam, his senses reeled, but an awful fascination kept his eyes glued upon the shouting, naked, dancing throng. Presently he caught sight of the blind flower-boy, who was capering in the centre with Dionysiac frenzy unlike his years. Blood was flowing freely from a self-inflicted wound in his shoulder, and he was quivering and jerking as though in a fit. The

old Sheikh, who stood near him, watching, withdrew the stiletto gently, wiped away the blood with a red handkerchief, and embracing the child very tenderly, held his head against his breast, whispering for some time into his ear. Then he released the boy, who was completely calmed; and Riccardo noticed that the blood had ceased to flow.

Presently his attention was turned towards Ali. Bloodstained, sweating, and rocking his naked body backwards and forwards, he withdrew one blade from his body and waved it above his head, uttering wild-beast noises as he did so. Even in his frenzy his eyes were still fixed on the complacent dragoman, who returned his gaze insolently. Both the ladies had covered their faces with their hands, unable to look any more. Ali continued to dance, and came nearer to the chairs. He gesticulated and contorted himself, and his cries grew hoarser. Yussef crossed his arms and smiled contemptuously. The next moment, with a swift forward lunge, Ali had driven the blade into his enemy's chest. Yussef gave a gurgling scream, and fell forward on to his face. The steel had gone home to his heart.

Mrs. Moore gave a loud shriek. Her husband gripped the assassin firmly by the arm, but Ali twisted round on him like lightning, his body was slippery with blood. The two men swayed in conflict. The American managed to shout over his shoulder, "Van Deep, get the women out of this!"

But this was not easily done. Van Deep was already attacked. What had been a bloodstained pandemonium before, became sheer hell, full of demoniacal faces and half-naked bodies. It was impossible to stir. Riccardo was swept back to the wall and pinned there.

"Don't fire if you can help it," he yelled in despair, keeping his hand on his own revolver. The narrow space of the mosque had become filled by struggling forms. There were two factions—those who were making matters worse by attempting to force order, and those who were drunk with blood and excitement. He was unable to see Gioconda. After a little, he perceived that she and Mrs. Moore were in the further corner, barricaded in by their own chairs. He thanked God between his teeth that apparently they were left unmolested. The worst fighting was in the centre. He made a desperate endeavour to forge his way to where Moore's pale and dishevelled head rose in the thick of it. It was hopeless. He used his fists this way and that, and was pummelled freely back, but was unable to get to Moore. Van Deep and he were standing by this time with their backs to the wall, fighting off a score of assailants. Riccardo's mouth was cut and his nose bleeding, but he succeeded at last in reaching the frightened women behind their barricade. Mrs. Moore was past speech; Gioconda white but courageous. He shouted to Van Deep to make a rush for the other side, so as to divert the press of the seething Arabs, but his voice was utterly drowned. Van Deep either understood, however, or thought out the same plan; for the two men edged and pushed in the opposite direction, drawing attention away for the instant. Riccardo bade Gioconda put her arms round his waist and Mrs. Moore to take Gioconda's in a similar manner, and to push after him when he gave the word. The opportunity occurred at last, and the three of them dashed through the doorway into the courtyard.

But this was as full as the mosque. Unfriendly faces thronged around them. The two women and

Riccardo were pressed and hustled, scowling Arabs blocked their way. Mrs. Moore collapsed, and fell to the ground in a faint. Gioconda and Riccardo succeeded, however, in raising her between them and in dragging her across the courtyard. They were checked by a burly-looking fellow with a deep scar across his cheek, and in a moment a menacing group was between them and freedom. Gioconda, as the only one able to speak Arabic, implored him to let them pass out. He replied by a curse, and raised a shout of "Death to the unbelievers! Let the dogs of Christians perish! Purify the Holy City! *Ed-Din, ed-Din!*" The cry was taken up by a hundred throats, supplemented by "Death to the Roumi!" To Riccardo's relief, however, no attempt was yet made to lay hands on the two women. Moved by one accord, the majority of frenzied shouters surged out into the street with cries of "*Ed-Din!* Free the Holy City! Mahomet is the Prophet of Allah!"

Riccardo made a fresh attempt to plough his way through the mass of seething madmen. He was struck violently and forced back with the two women into a corner of the courtyard. The big man whom Gioconda had addressed, however, struck back Riccardo's assailant, with a blow that sent him spinning, and winnowed with his fists right and left until a certain space had been won, though for what reason he had constituted himself their defender Riccardo was unable to guess.

Gioconda renewed her entreaty to him to get them out, promising him that he should be rewarded for so doing, but he kept surly silence, and kept them penned in the corner. For the moment this was the best thing, and Riccardo and Gioconda made use of the

breathing time in trying to bring the fainting woman back to consciousness. With her dead weight it was doubly difficult to do anything. Riccardo was unwilling to use his revolver; that would ensure to a certainty their lives being made forfeit.

All at once, from the interior of the mosque, a report rang out. A second and third report. Riccardo's heart grew sick within him. The noise was redoubled. A fourth report bit out above the uproar.

Suddenly the tumult and yelling in the street outside increased in volume. Riccardo strained his ears to hear if there were another revolver shot from inside, but the deafening shouting in the street drowned it if there were one. A second rush was made out of the courtyard into the street, but the press surged back again like a recoiling billow.

He met Gioconda's eyes.

"You are hurt?" she said. "Can you keep up?"

He was aware that blood was running into his eyes "It is nothing," he said reassuringly. Then he added in a lower tone: "If I am done for, you must get out at any cost, and if the worst comes to the worst——" He handed her his revolver, and with understanding she put it into the pocket of her long coat. Mrs. Moore was still unconscious. Her hat, half-torn from her head, and her blouse ripped across her shoulders lent her an aspect which reminded Riccardo, in the inconsequent way in which memory works, of a drunken woman he had once seen in the Corso Vittorio Emmanuele at home.

"Allah!" "*Ed-Din!*" "Death!" were words which he could understand, and which reached his ears again and again. Suddenly there was a momentary

lull—he could hear a voice above the rest—and then a renewed burst of shouting.

“Can you hear what they say?” he asked Gioconda.

She listened, but was unable to catch much more than he had done.

“Now is the time!” yelled an Arab near by. “Fight for us, O Great One! Destroy the unbelievers!”

During the next minute the crowd swept against them so closely that they were in danger of being crushed. Riccardo struck out in all directions to keep the two women from being injured. Then it parted, and he saw a man in a green robe, whose cold blue eyes met his for a fraction of a second, before the sea of human beings had shut him off again. It was long enough for Riccardo to recognise Si Ismael.

He became conscious a few moments later that some one was addressing him in a low voice from behind in French.

“Do not turn,” said the voice; “nor be surprised at what happens. You shall not be hurt, and the women will be carried to safety.”

Riccardo did not turn his head in accordance with the bidding of the friendly voice, but a fresh onslaught diverted his attention. Six powerful men were at fisticuffs with their self-appointed guard, and he was felled to the ground. They next gave their attention to Riccardo. He struggled frantically, hitting this way and that. One man reeled back from a well-planted blow in his forehead. But he was outnumbered, and in spite of his utmost resistance was overpowered, momentarily stunned, and bound hand and foot with ropes.

When his dazed sense returned, he found himself

slung like a bag of potatoes upon the back of one of his assailants, and that the two women had had their wrists tied together. Mrs. Moore was carried by another Arab, Gioconda walked between the two. Way was made for them at last, and they gained the open street. It was swarming with excited people, veiled women amongst them, as well as the unveiled hags from Bedouin tribes. The rest were for the most part old men and yelling children; the active-bodied had rushed on pell-mell to the French quarter. They walked along, accompanied by several hundreds of curious, menacing, and cursing spectators.

Above all these discordant noises there came a boom, ominous, deep-mouthed. Riccardo knew then that the garrison was astir, and that the machine-guns had been turned on the mob. Boom, boom! sounded the sinister music of the guns.

It was followed by a renewed tumult: the mob was heading back again from the French quarter. Perhaps they had been driven into temporary retreat by the soldiers. Perhaps they were returning to begin the attack from a fresh point.

Their captors swore angrily, struck and cursed the oncoming mob, and endeavoured to make headway, but were borne swiftly backwards as straws on the crest of a receding wave, and separated hopelessly. The human wave beat and broke against the *zaouia*, and in the press Riccardo's captor suddenly stumbled, lost his footing, and fell heavily. For a sickening moment Riccardo had a vision of feet—feet, trampling feet; the acrid smell of human flesh was in his nostrils, a great horror overtook him, and then came a great darkness and silence.

CHAPTER IX

RICCARDO imagined that he was lying at the bottom of the sea in a vast twilight of swaying waters ; fish, colourless and phantom-like, moving slowly above him. Presently a human face leant over him, black with decomposition, and fear froze his limbs. But gradually the face lost its livid greyness, life came back to the blue lips, and the gigantic fishes faded. In their stead he beheld a yellow and not over-clean countenance which somehow seemed familiar to him. Some one was drenching his forehead and neck with water that trickled slowly with a glug-glug sound from the mouth of an earthen amphora tipped at an angle over him. Overhead he perceived, vaguely, open sky, pearl-grey. A few stars hung high up, faintly visible against the colourless dusk. He wondered whether it were morning or evening.

"What has happened . . . what hour is it?" he asked feebly.

"Bravo! monsieur is better? . . . monsieur must drink." A flask was held to his lips; Riccardo recognised it as his own. His intelligence returned to him by degrees. He was conscious of an aged woman sitting at a little distance on a heap of sacks, of a long string of orange-peel dangling from a cord in a cool wind. The sky above him had become fired with yellow and orange, the stars had died in the light.

He repeated his question querulously.

The Jew pointed upwards. "It is the sunrise."

Riccardo attempted to lift his head, but lay back again and shut his eyes. His head ached vilely. The Jew gave him a second mouthful of brandy, and after a moment he raised himself once more, this time with more success. He stretched his limbs, and found to his relief that he could move them, though the process was painful, with the exception of his left arm, which gave him the most exquisite agony. His whole bruised framework complained of his efforts, and he sank back.

"Where am I?" he asked at length. "Tell me, what has happened."

"You are on the roof of my house, monsieur," said the Jew, with some pride. "I see you last night on the ground, on a heap, and I think that you are dead. So I put my hand in your pockets to prevent stealing by unprincipled men, and you move. I listen; I hear your heart beat. I carry you here; I see you not badly hurt, only much blood gone. I stop blood, I put you on the roof. Impossible to return to hotel, because hotel is burnt."

"Burnt!" echoed Riccardo.

"There was big fight last night. There was also big fire in the French quarter. The *caserne* also, with many of French army, is blown up in the air."

"And now?"

The Jew put his hand to his mouth. "The Arabs they make success last night, but by this afternoon—you will see—*pouf!* everything is over! This man strung up, that man strung up, rows and rows, like that orange peel. It is the thought of a child to rise against the French—the French are too strong for

them. But then the Arab, he is a child. It is much ignorance. Besides, what happen? More soldiers, and plenty executions. Pom, pom! *C'est tout!*"

The old woman, her uncomely head tied up in a dirty pink kerchief, was bending over a savoury smelling mess in an iron pan, cooking on a charcoal brazier. From time to time she poked at it with a wooden spoon.

"You must lie here till this afternoon," continued the Jew. "Then everything is quiet again. . . . Monsieur will remember that I have done much for him, is it not, and lessen the undeserved poverty of my house?"

Riccardo had an impulse to smile as he answered that his financial memory should not fail him, had not another question, which he scarcely dared to put, trembled on his lips.

"The ladies—what happened to them?"

"I saw nothing of ladies—only monsieur."

"Did you hear nothing?"

"Nothing."

"No one said anything of them——?"

"I heard nothing, monsieur."

Riccardo felt a sickening dread.

"If they had been dead, I should have seen," his protector remarked succinctly. Riccardo relapsed into silence, his mind tortured by forebodings and fears.

Half an hour passed. At an imperative snarl from her lord, the woman presently got up with a groan, and ladled some of the savoury pottage on to a wooden plate. The Jew insisted that Riccardo should eat of it, and when once he began he was surprised to find that he had an appetite. The dish was largely composed of lentils and onions; but, supplemented by

a draught of sour red wine which the Jew had somehow procured, it put fresh life into him.

Three hours later he was able to rise painfully to his feet and hobble around the mud-roof terrace, with its low, protecting parapet. The old Jewess washed and massaged his arm, rubbed it with an evil-smelling ointment, and bound it between splints. It was now in a sling. He was sore and bruised from top to toe, but, thank Heaven, he had the use of his legs. His progress was chattered over and observed by three other women who came up at intervals to look at him and perform menial tasks on the terrace. Two were fat, unclean, and elderly, and the third was a buxom girl of sixteen who would one day be the same. The roof was evidently used as a drying-ground, from the number of poor garments suspended from a rope beside the orange peel; there was a smell of rancid oil, and Riccardo occasionally had a whiff of a stench that was past description. The sun had climbed higher in the sky, and its beams were scorching already.

"I must go out," Riccardo said, addressing his host, who had returned after a brief absence. That personage's mouth fell open.

"Go out! Is monsieur mad?"

"No, but I must have a guide——"

The Jew clasped his hands dramatically.

"Monsieur is surely still ill in the head! If he goes out he will be killed. And where could he go?"

"You must take me to the house of Si Ismael ben Aloui."

"Into the house of——! Into the very house of hell, monsieur! Surely I must put a cooling bandage on the head of monsieur."

"I am not joking," Riccardo returned impatiently.

"You must disguise me somehow, I do not care how, and we must go directly to Si Ismael."

"But if I am discovered with monsieur, my life is not worth a centime! I cannot go."

"Then the lessening of your undeserved poverty will be in inverse proportion to your fear."

The Jew considered, hesitating between cupidity and cowardice.

"What assurance have I that monsieur will not be killed, and thus I lose all?"

"You have a card?"

"Yes, monsieur."

He extracted an elderly leather case of Arab make, and presented Riccardo with a card upon which his name, Raphael Bokhara ben Daoud was inscribed, with many flourishes, and the information that he was Guide number 8 of Kairouan.

Riccardo sat down and drew out his pocket-book, from which he noticed all the paper money had been removed. He wrote—

"In recognition of services rendered me by Raphael Bokhara ben Daoud of Kairouan, I hereby authorise him to draw the sum of three hundred francs from my account at the Banque de Tunisie.

"Signed, RICCARDO BASTIAGNINI."

He handed it to the Jew. "If you accompany me, you shall have the fellow to that."

The Jew compressed his lips, read the document, and blinked his red-rimmed eyes.

"Three *hundred*, monsieur?"

"Three hundred."

"Is it possible! Monsieur means three thousand!"

"I do not mean anything of the kind."

"What! I have saved the life of monsieur at the risk of my own and those of my virtuous family, I have nurtured monsieur as if he were my own son, I have given him food and drink, kindness and generosity, and he offers me—three hundred francs!"

This was all in a jargon of broken French. Riccardo knew that the sum he had offered represented the old man's earnings as a guide for a season, even if his good luck were exceptional.

But the Jew was laboriously writing on the reverse of the sheet. When he had finished, he handed it to Riccardo with reproachful dignity. Riccardo examined it. It was headed like a bill.

M. Riccardo Bastiagnini debtor to Raphael Bokhara: Guide 8 of Kairouan. June 27th, 1908.

Life of the creditor	2000 francs.
Services of M. Bokhara as guide	100 francs.
Pension complet for 24 hours in the house of M. Bokhara	100 francs 50 centimes.
Total,	2200 francs 50 centimes.

Riccardo laughed. "Why the fifty centimes?"

"Because there are several small expenses."

"You have priced my life too high."

"The life of monsieur cannot be worth less than two thousand francs."

"I am not sure whether under present circumstances it is worth more than two sous!" Riccardo said, with some genuine bitterness.

"Monsieur underestimates his value."

"Two sous is an overestimation."

Raphael made a magnanimous gesture.

"Monsieur, I will throw in your life at a thousand francs,"

"A thousand thanks! But I repeat it is not worth so much. I will not pay a penny more than five hundred francs for my present worthless existence."

"Monsieur! And the noble blood of monsieur, and his good looks! Do they go for five hundred francs?"

"I'm afraid that those valuable commodities will not bring you in a penny more."

The Jew began to scream in dispute until his jaws must have ached with simulated rage; but Riccardo would not give in. For politic, even more than economic reasons, it was wiser to argue his claim. Finally, an agreement was arrived at. Riccardo gained his point: he would pay nine hundred francs inclusive if the Jew would take him to Si Ismael's house within the next two hours. Fresh documents were drawn up and the affair settled. Now that matters were arranged, Raphael became perfectly amiable again, and a consultation ensued between him and the four women, who had been interested spectators of the scene, as to what disguise Riccardo should adopt. It was decided that the all-enveloping woman's haik was the best, and from somewhere an Arab woman's complete outfit was produced. Riccardo thought it possible that Raphael carried on a second-hand clothes business as well as that of a guide. The women held their sides with laughter as they dressed him, first of all stripping him to the skin. Luckily he was clean-shaven, so that, even if the haik should be accidentally torn aside, his disguise need not necessarily be penetrated. He was then given a draught of goat's milk to fortify him.

Some rough stairs, made of palm trunks embedded into cob, descended into a courtyard, dirtier than

anything Riccardo had ever seen. Men, Jews, all of them, lounged about, talking and disputing; and slatternly Jewesses screamed and laughed and worked. Children, chickens, starved cats and mangy dogs ran about underfoot, and an indescribable mess of garbage flung out to rot in the sunshine gave out a nauseatingly foul smell. It appeared that all these human beings were related to Raphael in varying degree, uncles, brothers-in-law, cousins, sons, aunts, and daughters-in-law, who lived and had their being in the rooms leading off this courtyard.

They had concerted the plan which they anticipated would cause least attention. Raphael was to walk some distance ahead; Riccardo to follow after without seeming to do so, until they arrived at the marabout's house. There the Jew was to knock demanding Si Ismael, and both were to enter if possible.

The house of Raphael Bokhara was situated in one of the dirtiest quarters of Kairouan, mostly inhabited by Jews, and forming a kind of Hara or Ghetto. But this morning these streets were not thronged by noisy crowds as usual. The fear of fanaticism lay upon them all. A Jew was even more accursed in Moslem eyes than a Christian, and spat upon, and kicked accordingly. The Christian, as top dog, did the kicking and spitting in the normal state of things—if not actually, then in spirit. But the Jew is spurned of both. Hence an Israelite is chary of appearance when the Moslem war-cry is raised.

They soon reached the Arab streets. Here there were groups of men, discoursing in low voices; occasionally a rider galloped at breakneck speed through them, disregarding obstacles; at a corner

a dervish was shrieking out prophecies in a high monotonous voice to frightened listeners, and there was no buying or selling. Here and there Riccardo saw a still figure stained with blood: death had evidently been abroad in the highways last night.

The Jew was more than once truculently stopped, but he had a cringing excuse and was allowed to pass with a curse and a blow. There was a feeling of waiting and suspense in the air. Riccardo noticed that every man was well armed, and a patrol paraded up and down. He walked along with mincing steps, and though roughly addressed once or twice, he kept silence and was unmolested. They passed into less frequented streets: these to-day wore a deserted and intimidated appearance. There were no pleasant street-cries, no water-sellers, no coffee-houses crowded with contented idlers. Once he almost slipped in a half-dried pool of blood. Another time he came near falling over the corpse of a French soldier. Silence pervaded the empty shops. The sun had climbed into the stainless blue, and the light and heat became unbearable to his bruised body.

Suddenly the Jew came to a halt, and then crept back to Riccardo. Not a living creature was in sight in the narrow little byway through which they were passing, shut in by high, whitewashed walls on either side. It bore a familiar look, somehow.

"Monsieur—" said Raphael. "Hush—! Listen!"

Riccardo hearkened. There was an ominous sound, like the roar of waters—the sound of an immense multitude.

"The French have sent more soldiers. There will be fighting with the city! For the love of God let us go back, monsieur!"

"Go back! We are almost there."

"It is folly to go towards that——!"

He indicated with a shaking forefinger the approaching tumult.

"Go on, fool, I say! If you don't I will hand you over to the next Arab we meet, and myself too. You shall not get even a ten-centime piece——"

"Oh, monsieur, monsieur, I am an old man——"

"Go on, I say!"

Shuddering in every limb, the Jew proceeded, but the next moment a wild torrent of humanity poured down upon them. Riccardo reached the old man in time to draw him into the sheltering embrasure of a doorway, keeping a surreptitious hold on his robe lest he should escape him. The Jew crouched into the shadow as far as possible, but the mob were too excited and intent to notice his presence. Their faces were rolling with sweat, and in their eyes was the look of dogged despair and bestial fear only to be seen in those whom disaster had thoroughly demoralised. As they went they uttered wild cries. Women—there were women too, shrieked out, "Woe, woe!" Some looked fierce, some craven; all were white with dust. Horsemen went with the crowd on horses as dejected and dusty as their masters. Many were wounded.

They came to a standstill, and the crush became fearful. Those behind were pressed upon by those still farther behind; those in front by those receding still farther ahead. The Jew whimpered in his corner like a frightened urchin.

All at once there was a cry—

"The Great One! Ismael, Ismael!"

Riccardo, craning above the heads of the people, could see a single horseman forging his way through

the crowd. There were demonstrations of joy, apathetic faces brightened, hoarse throats burst into a roar. The single horseman was Si Ismael. He reined up just opposite the door where Riccardo stood ; his horse's ears twitching backwards and forwards, its nostrils red as fire and its flanks wet. His countenance was pale, his lips set—he had the aspect of a man who has seen his dearest hopes shattered.

Rising in his stirrups, he shouted for silence ; and silence, so great was his power still, fell.

"Whence come ye ?" he asked in a clear, hard voice, like the lash of a whip. "Whence come ye, cowards ? Ye did not fear folly, why fear death ! Back, dogs ! back, sots—and meet it !"

There was an indistinct rumble after the first moment of astonishment.

"Get back—and meet the death ye have deserved. I will head the pack of curs——!"

Every word was metallic and fell hard. There was a movement like the sudden turbulence of waves under a squall. The murmuring grew. Amazement gave place to lowering anger. Confused shouting was heard in the rear.

The voice lashed out again—

"Woe unto you, men of Kairouan, men of the Sacred City ! O blind fools ! ye have destroyed the work of twenty years in one night of madness sent by Shaitan ! Drunk with folly, ye have delivered yourselves and your children's children to infamy. Allah hath deserted you, seeing that ye waited not for His counsel nor for His blessing. There is no pity for you on earth, no peace for you in Paradise. Woe unto, woe unto you !"

"Si Ismael, not Allah, hath deserted us !" cried a blood-bespattered horseman angrily above the ominous

growling of the rest. "Who received the news of victory yester-even with silence and an averted face? Who kept a dark mien in the hour of triumph? Who urged peace like a woman, saying that the hour had not come? Truly our prophet is proved a false prophet and a chicken-hearted! Who knows but that he hath not sold himself to the French! He has eagerly prayed for inaction—the prayer may be bought . . ."

His voice was drowned in the snarl of the crowd, in hundreds of conflicting voices and cries. Babel was let loose—a confusion of tongues arose. There were cries of "Down with the false Prophet!"

"Down with the coward!"

"Fight for us, Ismael!"

"Impostor! Impious one!"

"Healer, work us a miracle!"

"Kill the dog, son of a dog!"

"Allah wither him and his children's children!"

Presently the voice of Si Ismael rose again, but it was impossible to hear what he said above the yelling disorder. The multitude about him swayed like a turbulent sea backwards and forwards. Arms were raised, menacing faces lifted; eyes glittered with hatred; teeth were bared like fangs—the wolf was uppermost.

"Thou hast betrayed us to the Roumi!"

"Traitor!"

"Polluter!"

Si Ismael sat unmoved above the throng, his eyebrows raised, a scornful smile on his lips. Riccardo could not help but admire his bravery. Had he shown an atom of cowardice, this wild-beast horde would have dragged him to earth in a moment and torn him

limb from limb. A shuddering wail close beside him diverted Riccardo's attention for a moment. A woman, muffled like himself, was standing in the embrasure beside him, and it was from her lips that it had proceeded.

"Get you home, daughters," said an elderly man, who was wedged beside them. "Prepare the funeral meats for your husbands and sons."

But the fury of the mob grew with every second. All their despair, all their disappointment was turned into a frenzy of hatred for the man who but a few days before had been their demi-god; who had healed their sick and built their future.

"They will kill him and us too," said the Jew, his teeth chattering.

Si Ismael suddenly urged his horse forward, but its bridle was seized, and the animal reared and plunged a yard from the little group in the doorway. The next event happened so quickly that they were only conscious of a swift thrust, a gleam, and that Si Ismael swayed uncertainly in the saddle, reeled and fell a foot from the doorway, one foot still in the stirrups. The horse reared again, and struck out wildly, before the crowd had realised what had happened. But the horse's plunge had released the prostrate man's foot, and the woman beside Riccardo darted forward and dragged the inert body from beneath the infuriated hoofs. A yell, a fiendish sound, the sound of bloodthirsty animals, burst from the throats of the crowd. It was separated from its prey only by the maddened horse. Riccardo felt the door behind him give; and almost fell backwards as it opened. With quickness of comprehension he turned and helped to drag the unconscious man inside, and to bang the door to from within. They were only just in time. As they succeeded, there was

the thud of clenched fists on the heavy woodwork, the scream of a horse in mortal pain. The Jew was left outside, they could hear his agonised cry. A negro, whom Riccardo recognised instantly, had opened to them, and he now joined them in helping to secure the door by means of substantial bolts.

The woman flung aside her haik, so as to have no impediment in her swift movements. It was Mabrouka. For a similar reason he threw off his. She gave him a cursory glance of recognition. There came a terrific battery on the door.

"They will burst that door before long. We must get him away," she said to him. The scar in either cheek flamed scarlet, her eyes were anguished.

The big negro, his flabby lips working with fear, stooped and picked up the wounded man as if he were a child, and ran before them across the patio, up the stairs, along a passage, up half a dozen steps, and so on to the roof. Mabrouka and Riccardo followed; she agile as a cat, he setting his teeth to force his bruised and aching body to the task.

The roofs in this quarter were connected, owing to the ancient custom whereby Arab women of quality visited each other on the flat and whitewashed house-tops, which are almost always devoted to the women of the household. There was a good deal of climbing, however, and Riccardo, impeded by his woman's garments, streamed with perspiration. Happily no women were visible on this roof-world as usual—the fear of the guns which had yesterday raked the quarter was upon them. Everything seemed dazzlingly white to Riccardo; his eyeballs were dry with the glare and with racking pain; his arm ached furiously, and his stiff limbs rebelled at the pace.

At last Mabrouka gave a warning grunt, and they came to a halt. This terrace had a desolate appearance, withered grass sprouted up here and there, and the broken shards of a pitcher lay scattered about on the hot surface of the porcelain tiles. It was evidently an uninhabited house. They descended, and found the empty first floor of what had been at one time a luxurious Arab dwelling. Tiles of brilliant hues, peacock-blue, pale green, and turquoise blue decorated the rooms and colonnade. But it was sadly dilapidated. Portions of the stucco frieze and ceiling had given way, spaces yawned where tiles had been gouged out and never replaced.

The fugitives came to a panting stop in the room which had at one time harboured the harem of a wealthy master. It was cool, a pierced mashrabiya window admitted a speckled light, and the sun could not reach the entrance across the breadth of the colonnade. Mabrouka took off her haik completely, and, rolling it up, put it down so as to form a pillow for the unconscious man, whom the negro placed with the tenderness of a woman on the floor. Blood was welling rapidly from a wound in the abdomen, soaking the embroidered sash and *djebbah*. Mabrouka removed his clothing with deft fingers, until the ghastly wound was revealed. Riccardo suddenly felt sick at the sight and crawled outside to retch in the sunlight. The exertion had been too much for his already exhausted frame. He dared not go back until he felt more recovered, and watched with a fascinated and incurious gaze a green lizard basking itself on a broken tile beside him, its quick tongue shooting out from time to time, its needle-sharp eyes moving from this side to that. The negro passed him as he lay

there, and presently repassed with a broken pitcher full of water.

Gradually the nausea left Riccardo, and his dizziness ceased. He went back feebly.

Mabrouka was staring out past him with unblinking eyes. The purple stains around them were deeper than ever, her mouth was piteous.

She turned slowly and regarded him.

"Are you wounded then?"

"I was knocked about yesterday."

He came and sat beside her. "Is he badly hurt?"

"The wound is deep. . . . I have dressed it and made bandages out of the turban. I had some ointment, which I have always in my sleeve, to stop blood. But it is not of much use."

She spoke with a clicking monotony.

"He is dying?"

"I know not."

"I can do nothing?"

She shook her head speechlessly, tears welling into her great eyes.

They sat for a long while in silence. Once Beda the negro saw a scorpion in a corner of the wall by the ceiling, knocked it down with a stick, and crushed it with his slipperless foot. The heat of the day grew. From time to time Beda replenished the pitcher of water, and Mabrouka bathed the temples of the senseless man. His lips were moving in delirium: he was babbling in Arabic, in French, and in unknown tongues.

At midday Beda left them, and after a great while returned, showing his teeth as if to court approval. He had skulked and foraged to some purpose, for he bore a bowl of milk, and a flat loaf of Arab bread, or *kahk*. The sick man drank a little of the milk, but

was soon raving again. Mabrouka ate nothing; but Riccardo was revived by a draught of milk and a piece of bread.

Presently the murmuring voice of the dying man ceased, but his breathing was loud and painful. At intervals they could hear the distant rumble of guns, and once a piece of stucco, detached by the vibration, fell and broke to dust on the floor. Si Ismael opened his eyes—they travelled round the room, rested on Riccardo, on Beda, and Mabrouka in turn. She met them with the agonised, wistful appeal of a dumb animal.

“Mabrouka, *binti* !¹” said Si Ismael in a low voice.

“Sidi !” Her eyes brimmed over, and the hot tears fell on to his hand.

He looked at her kindly, vaguely.

“We have lost, my daughter. . . . The doors are closed. . . . Who is that yonder? That woman?”

“The Sicilian,” said Mabrouka, without lifting her gaze.

“Tell him to come . . .”

Riccardo approached and crouched by his improvised pillow. The sick man plucked with his fingers at the woman’s dress which Riccardo wore.

“It is you then . . . you.” He paused. “The duel is over, *hein*, my friend? . . . but not as you thought, or I thought. . . . We reckoned without two things, the foolishness of man, and the wisdom of God . . .” A gathering energy grew in him despite his weakness.

“But you were wrong . . . these people—my people—are children, ignorant children; but they will come into their heritage in the end . . . their heritage.

¹ “My daughter.”

They will be great. They need the man, the Man. . . . The East is the mother of the future; the womb of the great new time. Twilight has come for the Western gods—your Mammon will crumble before the Destroyer of images—before the Prophet of God. Your civilisation will die, your lights will be put out . . .” He choked. Then after a moment he went on:—“The new East, the new Islam, the new image-breaking . . . they are coming, they are coming! The spirit of virility shall impregnate the old East and she will bring forth the new . . . a daughter more beautiful than a beautiful mother!” His blood-shot eyes blazed. “Not through the colonising French, nor the brutalising English, nor the bestialising Germans—but by the power of Allah. . . . Mecca the Holy will fall, Alexandria the Holy will fall, Kairouan the Holy will fall, and in Rashid shall the banner of Mahomet be planted for all time by the new Mahomet, son of Mahomet, greatest of all the Prophets! The world shall belong to el-Islam—civilisation shall belong to Africa.”

He paused again, catching his breath painfully, then continued in a weaker tone: “Mabrouka will bring your cousin to you—the younger one; she is safe. The other two are in my house with my women; they are well and unhurt. The two Americans received many injuries, but were abandoned last night by their captors during a panic. They were carried away by the French, and will recover. Fools have tough skins . . .”

Riccardo stammered his thanks. Si Ismael closed his eyes for a little, and then regarded him again with good-humoured sadness.

“As for you—you have seen and learnt a little . . . the Sicilian is a bastard race with the temper of

mongrels . . . but you have gained something. There is courage in you, there is sincerity, and there is obstinacy . . . you have not Arab blood in you for nothing. . . . You have understanding . . . do not dull it. . . . Love God, and do not be ashamed ; love women, and do not be ashamed ; love yourself, and do not be ashamed—that is the secret of life . . .”

His mouth closed, his face relaxed, exhaustion had overtaken him.

Mabrouka flung herself beside him with a bitter cry.

“ Sidi, sidi ! Am I utterly unworthy ? Have I not worked for thee too, without complaint ? ”

He smiled faintly, and said, “ Thou art free, Mabrouka.”

“ Sidi, sidi, let me die with thee ! ”

His lips moved in half-meant mockery. “ What have I to do with thee—thou who art unclean . . . thou who countest the Christian and the outcast among thy lovers . . . ”

She raised wild eyes to his.

“ Peace unto thee, *binti*,” he repeated weakly. “ Take thy freedom.”

“ What is freedom without thee ? ”

“ There is work to do still. . . . Thou art a wandering soul between East and West, my poor Mabrouka, my little one—dance and love still—dance. . . . I have forgiven thee many times over . . . wast thou not a wild bird . . . the daughter of a wild bird . . . the cage was narrow . . . ” His voice trailed off into silence ; he was beginning to wander again.

“ For seven years I have done thy bidding,” she cried, taking him almost roughly by the shoulders.

He roused himself. “ My daughter ! It shall not

be forgotten . . . if I forget not, the guardian of Paradise will not forget. . . . In the Name of Allah the All-Merciful, the Compassionate. . . . Go to Al-Medinah and visit the tomb of the lady Fatima. Make the pilgrimage. . . . Thou wilt find lovers in Mecca. . . . Old age is not hard in Mecca. . . . Say a *Fatihah* for me, daughter, at the Sanctuary, a *Fatihah*——”

She lifted her tear-stained face to listen.

“Take Said,” he added, with a smile. “It will please Said the poet to be called Hajj. Hajja Mabrouka! . . . Give my greeting to Mahommed Sa’ad Bey, and tell him how these last things came to pass. . . . Bend thou, beloved, my voice gets weak, and there are messages . . .” He whispered into her ear. Beda the negro gazed at them stonily. Riccardo withdrew a little, to the farther corner.

A quarter of an hour afterwards, Si Ismael had once more relapsed into unconsciousness, and, with one interval, this lasted until the end. The watchers moistened his lips from time to time with water: Mabrouka constantly kept his forehead cool with applications of wet strips of cloth. But gradually this became unnecessary. The fever died, a chilly sweat broke out over his body. Once he had a recurrence of delirium, and was only restrained by force from attempting to sit upright. Once he began in a loud voice to recite a fragment of the Moslem Testification——

“I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and I testify that thou art his Servant and his Apostle, and his Faithful Follower and Best Creature. And I bear Witness, O Apostle of Allah! that thou hast delivered the Faith and opened Grief, and published Proofs and

fought valiantly for thy Lord, and worshipped thy God till Certainty came to Thee. . . . And we Thy Friends, O Apostle of Allah! appear before Thee, Travellers from distant lands and far countries, through Dangers and Difficulties, in the Times of Darkness and in the Hours of Day, longing to give Thee rightful honours, and to obtain the blessings of this Intercession; for our sins have broken our backs, and thou intercedest with the Healer . . .”

He died about the hour of sunset, just as a blind muezzin in a neighbouring mosque, regardless of war or peace, death or life, cried as usual the invitation to prayer over a city whose streets were strewn with dead and injured.

Beda the negro turned his face towards the Sanctuary, and intoned the Prayer of the Beginning¹—

“ In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate,
Praise be to Allah, Sovereign of all worlds,
Who giveth Mercy,
The King of the Day of Faith.
Thee Lord, we worship, of Thee we implore help.
Guide us into the path of salvation,
The Path of those for whom Thy loving mercy is great,
Of those who have not deserved Thy wrath, nor deviated from the
Way.
Amin! O Lord of Angels, Djinns and Men.”

Mabrouka flung herself upon the dead man with a long and piercing cry, inhuman in its cadence, the wailing cry of the Eastern woman over her dead.

¹ The Fatihah, or first chapter of the Koran, recited at all seasons and on all occasions by the Mahommedan.

CHAPTER X

ALL the world knows the history of the brief rising in Kairouan—the bloody fiasco of 1908. The newspapers of Europe published long communications from special correspondents, describing the destruction of the French barracks by an explosion, the temporary demoralisation of the garrison, and the shortlived triumph of the insurgents. Revenge was summary and terrible. Sfax had already been cowed by milder methods: Kairouan was made an example of. No mercy was shown. At a time when France was spending blood and money in Morocco, she had to show the iron hand towards trouble in any other direction.

If the political side of the *affaire de Sfax* had been minimised by the press; the *affaire de Kairouan* was spoken of as a concerted blow on the part of the turbulent and less organised section of the Pan-Islamic party in North Africa. Alarmists wrote leading articles: the clique of native sycophants in Algiers and Tunis calling itself Young Africa assumed a shocked aspect which would have done credit to a High Churchman confronted with a Disestablishment Bill. His Highness the Bey expressed sorrow and horror at the outrages committed by his unworthy subjects.

Apart from the more serious aspect of the outrage,

the terrible loss of men, there was a minor but unparalleled scandal — the maltreatment of three tourists! and this when Tunis had been advertising itself as a winter resort equal to Gallicised and invalid-ridden Algiers. To flutter the golden goose in this way!

The two men, Moore and Van Deep, were reported as lying in a "critical condition" in a hospital at Sousse, but were now in "a fair way to recovery." Mrs. Moore's adventures had been of a more romantic character. She was interviewed by several newspapers, and described graphically to the *New York Herald* how she, after the terrible struggle in the mosque, had been carried in a fainting condition, together with a young Italian lady, into an Arab house, "with no home comforts, but most beautiful carpets," where they were handed over to three native ladies and several female servants. One of the ladies was an imbecile old woman of nearly a hundred, who spoke English with an Irish accent: the English of the forties! But as she was demented, Mrs. Moore remarked, it was not much good speaking to her. She was a renegade too—for she certainly was not a Christian, and she talked a great deal about "my son." They had been fed on strange foods, much too greasy and sweet, and they slept together on an embroidered Arab bed surmounted by a gilt star and crescent. One of the other women was pretty, "a sweet little creature," Mrs. Moore said, and both the younger women seemed to be daughters-in-law to the ancient dame. Neither spoke French, but the young Italian lady was able to converse with them in Arabic. They were shy, childish, and rather stupid, it appeared, and after the first curiosity on either side had died off,

conversation languished. Mrs. Moore confessed that she had been off her head with fright: she fully believed that they were destined to be the latest additions to a native harem, and was prepared, for her part, to shoot herself rather than yield to such an unthinkable fate. The young Italian lady had a revolver.

On the Saturday night they had both been awakened by the most terrible wailing and screaming sounds, and Mrs. Moore thought that the end was very near. But early on Sunday they were bundled up in veils, and the young Italian lady was told that they were to be sent back to their friends. They were forced to follow a big black man down several streets, and found a ramshackle cab with scarlet curtains waiting for them. Mrs. Moore had protested considerably at the thought of going she knew not whither, but the young Italian lady talked in Arabic to their conductor, and said it was all right, and that they were really to be driven to the French quarter. Mrs. Moore said that she had cried for joy. Very soon the cab stopped, and there was no one more surprised or delighted to see them than Madame Perrier, who, after the destruction of the hotel on that terrible night, had taken refuge with a civil engineer's wife. From thence the young Italian lady was conveyed by a very charming Italian marchese, whose name Mrs. Moore was unable to recollect—but he was a well-known antiquary, she believed—back to Tunis. The young Italian lady and she would be friends all their lives after having gone through such an awful time together, and she had invited her to come on a visit to her in New York. She had since heard that the young lady had become engaged to be married to the young antiquary, who

must have been off his head with anxiety about her Mrs. Moore added that she was making inquiries for the family of Yussef, with a view to making them a gift of money, as the ill-fated guide had met with his death in their employ. The difficulty was, she confessed in an interview which she gave on her return a month later, that Yussef seemed to have had at least seven mothers, all Levantines; and the number of his wives and children was scandalous. She had set an Armenian agent to the task of sifting them.

Under cover of night Riccardo had dragged himself back over the house-tops after Beda to the house of Mabrouka. As he entered he was shivering with cold, though the very stone was still hot to the touch after the long day of burning sun. Before midnight he was in a high fever, and he lost knowledge of the outside world. Occasionally he heard the sound of wailing, and thought it came from lost spirits who flitted around his couch in the guise of bloodstained women with rent veils. Whether he had received an injury on the head when lying senseless under the trampling rioters, or whether the exertion of the day had drawn too largely on his already exhausted system he never knew; but for days he lived in this borderland of half-facts, conscious that some one fed him with a wooden spoon, conscious of the tortured pattern of the ironwork on the vast bed, and of devouring heat, conscious too, sometimes, that a face upon which two fiery crosses were lambent in either cheek bent over him, or that a hand stained with henna, and perfumed and cool, was laid upon his throbbing head. Once he heard a sonorous voice reading the Koran, and fought the unmeaning syllables out of his brain.

He had delusions: he imagined that they were killing Annunziata beside his bed, and that he had never yet told her he loved her, so that she would think that he was an accomplice. Then he saw Mabrouka smiling at him with half-closed eyes stained beneath with purple, and dancing . . . her foot slipped, in Annunziata's blood. And then she threatened him, and cried that she was overlooked by the evil eye because she had broken her vow, and rolled her haik into a bundle and threw it at him. It unrolled, enveloped, and stifled him. . . .

Now he fancied himself at Carthage, in the ruined Damous-el-Carita, picking wild-flowers with Annunziata in the sunlight, while the sea rising to meet the horizon was purple-blue as delphinium, and the barley rustling in the salt breeze: the breeze that blew across the African Sea from Sicily. And they heard Said singing a melancholy Arab song. Annunziata said it was a love-song, and ran away to hide in the barley.

At last there came a time of long, cool, natural sleep.

He awoke from it to his first real cognisance of his whereabouts, and his eyes wandered over the sunny, untidy room, with its semi-European luxury. There was Mabrouka, lying inert and fatigued on the long divan, and the mulatto girl squatting beside her. He stirred, and the mulatto, seeing that he was awake, started, and touched her mistress.

Mabrouka sprang to her feet, and came softly to the bedside, her weary eyes shining—

“Thou art better, *mon petit*?”

He smiled at her weakly, and then strove to utter a question.

She guessed at his meaning, and replied soothingly: "They know that you are safe——" and upon that assurance he slept again, on the high road to convalescence.

Mabrouka, like many women of the East, was a nurse by second nature. She moved like a cat, watched him untiringly, and had an air of fierce authority which alternated with delicious tenderness and bursts of gaiety. To shorten the long hours she told him Arab tales, translated into the quaint French that he found so delightful on her lips: the old, old tales which have been smoothened by repetition in the cafés, such as the adventures of Sidi Okbah, or the tale of Joseph the beautiful and Zulecha his mistress. Sometimes they were tales of Djinns—true histories which had happened to her grandmother and to her maternal aunt.

Occasionally, it is true, she would fall into fits of sombre brooding and melancholy; but this was nearly always when she imagined him asleep or apathetic.

One night, when he had had a slight recurrence of fever, and the night seemed endlessly long and hot, she told him another story, in a low, expressionless voice, looking before her into the sultry darkness and leaning her head against his pillow.

It was the story of a young Arab of noble birth, who had made a plaything of the little daughter of a dancing-woman down in the hot South, and had taken her with him to Algiers, where he lived as the Roumis live. There he let the girl talk to the pretty Roumi ladies and their husbands, as if she too had been a Frank. That was because he had been brought up in Paris and England, and because she was only a child. But he took her with him down to the South again,

when the bird had grown wings, and shut her up in the woman's quarter in the ancient way. Because the bird had learnt to flutter on the branches it pined in confinement, so one day took flight with a gay French officer who was passing through the desert to the North again. But though the escaped prisoner had longed for freedom, she found that the officer had no mind to let her fly into the wide world. He tried to fit the fetters of love about her wrists, but she would have none of it, and presently that officer—suddenly died.

She had got thus far in the tale, when Riccardo realised whose history he was hearing.

"Her husband killed him?"

Mabrouka made a slow movement, and leant closer to him.

"No," she said. "She killed him herself, and because she had no money left she stole his jewels. She felt strange and homesick, and her heart yearned after her own people that she had left. . . . The Arab woman is like that, *mon petit*, when tame birds leave the cage, they starve. For this reason it is not kind to open the door."

He waited, and she went on—

"She travelled by herself with only one servant, an old woman, back to the Algerian desert where her husband was Sheikh. She came into his presence: he seemed as though he saw her not. But he saw her—but yes, he saw her! a little afterwards, he had hot irons brought, and branded her with the accursed mark of the Christians on the left and on the right cheek. It hurt her very much, and she became ill in those days, and her heart was heavy within her. And she had expected death rather than this. But he turned

her away, and she went away, and danced again; here, there, everywhere, even in distant countries. . . . She had many lovers in those times, because she was different to the rest, and when the scars had healed, they added a *chic*, a mystery . . . the heart of the Arab loves mystery. Then he became—that is to say the man who had been her husband became—powerful as well as rich, because of his knowledge, and because he loved his people as a lover loves his mistress. And because the woman was yet very sorrowful because she loved him above all others, she went one night to his house, fearing death. But he received her, even with kindness; and, seeing that she went everywhere and was known of every one and knew them, he bade her to bring him news of those of whom he desired news. So from that day her eyes and ears were his. One thing he desired of her—that no man, even though he should possess her body, should any more behold her face. And she swore that misfortune should overtake her in the day that it should happen . . .”

Her voice broke, and he heard her catch her breath in a great sob.

“It was a perilous game, *mon cher*, that Game of Watching. He used to praise her. . . . Sometimes she hated him, sometimes she thought it would be easy to kill him . . . but his praise was always sweet. . . . She earned money, much money. Very often she felt gay when she remembered that she was rich . . . often she knew herself poorer than the raggedest Bedouin girl with a baby on her back. . . . *Wallah!* to what good thinking of those things . . . one's life is written; there is no help——”

Riccardo found no words.

She moved abruptly and laughed mirthlessly ; then recollecting him, gave him a drink of herbs, and left him to sleep. He saw her shadow in the doorway till the dusk of early morning replaced the indigo of night, and he fell into a wearied sleep.

One day he recalled this tale to her, but she grew dark with sudden anger, and denied ever having told it.

Soon after she was absent for a whole day. The long hours had never seemed so long. Weak and drowsy as he still was, he craved for her soothing hands, for her tales of djinns, for the sight of her sombre eyes. The mulatto girl fed him. He spent much of the next night in wakefulness: he felt a peevish resentment against Mabrouka for having deserted him without a word, the peevishness of a convalescent. But he slept late and far into the next day, and, waking, heard a sound of voices. There was a rustle of garments, the music of the *khal-khal*. He opened his eyes and saw that she had returned, and stood beside his bedside with a mysterious smile, a riddle incarnate.

"It is thou, returned at last, oh Sphinx!" he said gladly.

"It is I, oh foolish one!"

Her air of gaiety and importance mystified him.

"What hast thou been doing? Where hast thou been this long time?"

"I have been to get thee a present, *mon enfant*."

"A present?" he echoed, puzzled.

She turned on her heel and left him. He waited. There was a prodigious amount of whispering and colloquy. He closed his eyes again impatiently. Mabrouka had left him without explanation for

twenty-four hours, and when she came back she treated him as if he were——

Was he dreaming . . . ? Was the fever still in his brain, or was it Annunziata who was smiling at him with tears in her eyes ; timidly, happily . . . ?

“ Annunziata mia ! ” he cried, with a great and sudden pleasure.

She took him into her arms with a woman’s tenderness and laid fresh lips upon his.

It was a curious narrative which he heard from her. On the morning of her disappearance, an Arab speaking French had come to her and told her that her sister and cousin were together in a mosque and had sent him to fetch her. She had gone unsuspectingly, and had entered a gate, only to find herself in a trap. The gate closed behind her, and she was taken upstairs into the women’s apartments, where there was only one deaf old woman. Entreaties and threats had been useless ; the Arab downstairs only laughed at her, the old woman could not hear. As soon as dark came, she had been wrapped up in a roll of silk, and taken downstairs, placed into a motor car and driven off. She was unable to tell Riccardo how long she was in the car, it seemed more than a day, but it could not have been, because it was still dark when she arrived at her destination, was unrolled from her stifling confinement, and found herself in a spacious Arab country-house, to judge from its gardens. Here, in comparatively Europeanised surroundings, she remained. She surmised that the house belonged to some one of high rank, because there were so many women and the luxury was so great. There was an old woman whom every one feared, but who was very kind to

Annunziata, and talked excellent French. They spoke of her as the Princess. She was Turkish, and smoked an enormous number of cigarettes, and was monstrously fat. She scolded and petted the other women according to her whim or mood. One day a man came, and Annunziata was unceremoniously bundled away into hiding. Through a moment of carelessness on the part of the woman who guarded her, however, she managed to catch a glimpse of him, and saw that he wore European dress, was short and fair, and had a red fez on his head. The old woman talked to him in French part of the time, and Annunziata heard her call him "Your Highness." She had not dared to listen, and had slipped back again to her hiding-place.

"But when you left?" Riccardo asked.

"They took me away in a closed carriage, and drove for about two hours. I do not think it could have been farther away from Tunis than La Marsa, but I dared not look out. They simply set me down near the Porte de France, and drove off."

"La Marsa?" repeated Riccardo. "The Bey's cousin lives there, in one of the late Bey's palaces."

"Oh, several members of the Bey's family have palaces there. But I am not sure. It is safest to let things like that alone in this country."

"How did you know that I was here?"

"Salvatore had a funny letter in bad French to say you were safe. And yesterday Mabrouka came and wanted me to travel back with her. I would not at first, because of what happened last time, but she showed me your handkerchief. . . . Besides I knew her face. I left a letter for Gioconda, who had gone out with Giovanni, and started off with her at once."

"You knew her face?" said Riccardo uneasily.

"Yes. I had seen her on the terrace once or twice . . . you remember I told you about the Arab lady on the next terrace, to whom I threw a rose. . . . You must not think it strange of me, Riccardo, but a little while ago I had a silly, fanciful idea that you must have seen her and fallen in love with her. It was because one evening I saw some one—something, climb over the wall which divided the two. I could not sleep that night, and had gone out on the terrace to get cool, and had gone to sleep. Then I heard little noise, and woke up, and saw this figure. . . . You must forgive me. But you like things you do not understand."

He kissed her hand. "A little understanding is worse than none."

"Now of course I know it was not you; besides Mabrouka is not really very young. She is not pretty either, close to."

"No, it was not I."

She kissed him.

"That house is empty now. I found it out the day before yesterday. Giovanni—oh, I haven't told you that Giovanni wants to marry Gioconda—says that he will take it and alter it and live in it with Gioconda, so as to be near us. Salvatore asked the police, and they said that a man called Mahommed Sa'ad Bey, who is related to the Bey, had lived there, and had been suspected of complicity in something political, and had disappeared."

Annunziata travelled back to Tunis in the care of Madame Perrier that evening.

A few days later, Riccardo was able to get up, and after that his recovery was rapid. The day came when he was to go to Tunis. He dressed, but no

Mabrouka came in as usual to chatter cross-legged beside him on the floor while he drank his breakfast bowl of goat's milk, sipping herself from a tiny cup of coffee, and munching at indigestible Arab sweetmeats. He questioned the mulatto girl who had attended him. She shrugged her shoulders, and pointed vaguely.

"*Madame est aux bains ?*" queried Riccardo, knowing that she had learnt the meaning of this phrase. But she shook her head.

Beda entered, and Riccardo made a poor attempt to make himself understood in Arabic. Beda smiled, and putting his hand into his breast drew out a thin, yellow envelope. It carried with it a breath of a heavy perfume, jasmine or ambergris.

Riccardo opened it, and read in the ill-spelt, ill-written French that he knew and loved—

"Good-bye, *mon petit*. It is sad to me that you are going, and I fear that I shall weep. But I shall come back and see you, some day—perhaps. I have gone away on a long journey, to another country. I have been idle a long time, and our proverb says that when one is neither young nor in love nor without grief, idleness feeds the sorrow-weed. Said will join me from Tunis. In the winter I shall dance in Constantinople, where I have good business. . . . Think of Mabrouka as when you saw her first, dancing, not weeping as she is now, and sad to lose her *bon camarade*; and when you are happiest, wish her good fortune, for the wishes of the happy are louder in the ear of Allah than the wishes of the unhappy. . . . Next year, *inshallah*, I shall make the Pilgrimage, and I shall say a Fatihah for thee also. . . . Good-bye, *ia aini*, good-bye I kiss thee tenderly."

As he read the last words, a pigeon which she had fed almost every morning, flew in at the sunny doorway and began to coo, bowing its neck ridiculously. He remembered how she had told him that Allah had made the pigeon the holiest of birds, and that, in return, when it cooed, it made the prostration. He remembered, too, what she told him once of the pigeons of Mecca, wandering, free of wing above the Sanctuary, pensioners on the frugality of dusty pilgrims.

Folding the letter, with unsteady fingers, he watched the silver-breasted bird take flight again into the blue air, wheel round and disappear; then, with blurred vision, made a sign that he was ready to start.

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